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I Imagine You Here Now

*Relationship Maintenance Strategies in Long-
Distance Intimate Relationships*

IVETA JURKANE-HOBEIN



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Abstract

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Today, individuals can relatively easily meet and communicate with each other over great distances due to increased mobility and advances in communication technology. This also allows intimate relationships to be maintained over large geographical distances. Despite these developments, long-distance relationships (LDRs), i.e. intimate relationships maintained over geographical distance, remain understudied. The present thesis aims to fill this knowledge gap and investigates how intimate partners who live so far away from each other that they cannot meet every day make their relationship ongoing beyond face-to-face interaction.

Theoretically, this study departs from a symbolic interactionist viewpoint that invites us to study phenomena from the actor's perspective. Conceptually, the thesis builds on the recent development in sociology of intimate lives that sees intimacy as a relational quality that has to be worked on to be sustained, and that focuses on the practices that make a relationship a relationship. Empirically, the thesis is based upon 19 in-depth interviews with individuals from Latvia with long-distance relationship experience.

The thesis consists of four articles. Article I studies the context in which LDRs in Latvia are maintained, focusing on the normative constraints that complicate LDR maintenance. Article II analyses how intimacy is practiced over geographical distance. Article III examines how long-distance partners manage the experience of the time they are together and the time they are geographically apart. Article IV explores the aspect of idealization in LDRs. Overall, the thesis argues for the critical role of imagination in relationship maintenance. The relationship maintenance strategies identified within the articles are imagination-based mediated communication (creating sensual/embodied intimacy, emotional intimacy, daily intimacy and imagined individual intimacy); time-work strategies that enable long-distance partners to deal with the spatiotemporal borders of the time together and the time apart; and creating bi-directional idealization. The thesis is also one of the few works in the field of intimate lives in Eastern Europe and analyses the normative complications that long-distance partners face in their relationship maintenance in Latvia.

Keywords: intimacy, sociology of intimate lives, time, temporality, imagination, living apart together, symbolic interactionism, Latvia

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For Matthias

List of Articles

This thesis is based on the following articles, which are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals:

- I Jurkane-Hobein, I. (2014). Do I Qualify for a Love Relationship? Social Norms and Long-Distance Relationships in Post-Soviet Latvia. *Sexuality & Culture*. Advance online publication. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s12119-014-9263-0>
- II Jurkane-Hobein, Iveta. (2015). Imagining the absent partner. Intimacy and imagination in long-distance relationships. *Innovative Issues and Approaches in Social Sciences*, 8(1), 223-241. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12959/issn.1855-0541.IIASS-2015-no1-art13>
- III Jurkane-Hobein, I. (in press). When Less is More: On Time Work in Long-Distance Relationships. *Qualitative Sociology*.
- IV Jurkane-Hobein, I. (2015). *I Know that I Don't Know*. Bi-Directional Idealization in Long-Distance Relationships. *Manuscript submitted for publication*.

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Flemingsberg, February 2015
Iveta Jurkane-Hobein

1. Introduction

In the last hundred years or so the Western society has undergone dramatic changes such as urbanization and industrialization. A large number of people from rural regions moved to urban areas, leaving family and community members behind. A hundred years ago the interaction between family members split by urbanization was mostly mediated and thus delayed in time, and often sporadic (see e.g. Thomas & Znaniecki, 1996). Today, due to innovations in communication technology, we can talk about interconnectivity and time-space compression that make geographically distant places seem closer (Bauman, 2000; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1990): communication between individuals far away from each other can be frequent and instant.

The attitudes towards family life, marriage and couple relationships in the West in this period have changed as well. The previously strictly defined family institution has often been replaced by less institutionalized alternatives such as cohabitation before marriage (if marriage occurs at all) and having children outside wedlock (if having children at all). The marital vow “till death do us part” is often reduced to a mutual agreement to continue “the relationship only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfaction for each individual to stay within it” (Giddens, 1992, p. 58). Moreover, modern intimate relationships have been characterized by increased bodily and relational freedoms, as well as sexualisation (Almond, 2006; Bauman, 2003; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002; Giddens, 1992; Jamieson, 1998; Smart, 2007).

Increased and global human mobility as well as Internet-facilitated interconnectivity nowadays enable people to easily meet and interact with other people from different parts of the world. Likewise, the Internet enables individuals to find partners for intimate relationships more easily and within almost any geographical area. This mobility and interconnectedness is one of the major facilitating factors in the globalization of love (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2014) and the emergence of long-distance relationships (LDRs). An LDR is defined here as a relationship arrangement where the partners cannot meet every day due to geographical distance. Geographical distance between the intimate partners is what distinguishes LDRs from other types of relationship. In the context of the sexualisation of and the importance of

self-satisfaction in relationships, non-married LDRs may seem paradoxical as the intimate partners live apart and there are no institutionalized bounds for couples to remain committed (cf. Bergen, 2010). Some go as far as to argue that distant love in its pure form is “monkish” and “nun-like” and thus “scarcely liveable for non-monks and non-nuns” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2014, p. 48). In light of this, relationship-maintenance strategies in LDRs are an interesting subject to explore.

Latvia

The geographical focus of this study is Latvia. Latvia is a small country in Eastern Europe, one of the three Baltic countries, with a shrinking population of currently two million people. The societal changes discussed above, such as urbanization, geographical mobility and attitude change, have also affected Latvia; a country that has existed for less than a hundred years but that has a complicated history. Latvia as a country was founded after World War I. After World War II it remained occupied by the Soviet Army. The Soviet occupation meant that people had mobility options within one side of the Iron Curtain, namely within the Soviet Union, but not behind the Iron Curtain. Today, Latvia is an independent state, a member of the European Union and a part of the Schengen Area in which traveling across the borders of its member states is allowed without identity control. Latvia lost about twelve per cent of its population in the last ten years and about one quarter since 1990, mainly due to emigration (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2014). Currently, emigration from Latvia is motivated by socioeconomic reasons (Hazans, 2011; Mežs, Akule & Polatside, 2010) and a “desire to escape from poverty, low salaries, unemployment, underemployment, family reasons, the appeal of a ‘Western’ lifestyle, personal liberation, or a sense of adventure and self-realization” (Lulle, 2013, p. 10). Moreover, apart from the emigrants who leave the country permanently, some leave Latvia on short but frequent trips, e.g. for seasonal work, exchange projects, thus switching between proximal and long-distance arrangements with people around them. Nevertheless, this is the first study of LDRs in the Latvian context.

Long-Distance Intimate Relationships as the Research Subject

Additionally, while the notion of “being in two or more places” is well known and studied in migration studies,¹ family sociology has paid less at-

¹ See for instance, Faist and Özveren (2003) for transnational social space. Aija Lulle (2013) studied Latvian labour migrants who shuttled between Latvia and Guernsey and argued for an emergence *translocal* diaspora that is not fixed in one locality or place but is mobile and/or circular.

tention to families and couples living in several places (cf. Borell, 2003). Moreover, knowledge on how intimate relationships are maintained over distance in any context is scarce and claimed to be *terra incognita* (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2014, p. 47). The thesis aims to fill this knowledge gap.

Intimacy is defined in this dissertation as a relationship quality that one has to work on for the relationship to be continuous. Intimacy is maintained through practices of intimacy (Jamieson, 2011), which are “practices which enable, generate and sustain a subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special to each other” (p. 1) or what I call *relationship work*. Intimacy is here seen as multidimensional, referring to physical attraction, emotional attachment and openness, as well as shared everyday life and knowledge of one’s daily habits (Jamieson, 2011; Morgan, 2011; Article II). Hence, this thesis *aims to investigate how long-distance partners make their relationship continuous beyond face-to-face meetings, and maintain intimacy over geographical distance*. What relationship-maintenance strategies do long-distance partners use to keep the levels of relationship quality and satisfaction high enough for the relationship to be “worth” continuing? How do long-distance partners manage the experiences of the time they are together face-to-face and the time they are apart? And what are the complications that they face in maintaining their LDR? These are some of the questions that are dealt with in this dissertation. These questions are examined against the context of what Beck-Gernsheim (1998; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) call the “post-familial family” which is marked with de-institutionalization of family relationships and thus would suggest that LDRs are difficult to maintain or at least that the maintenance of the relationship is unsafe.

The thesis looks at what long-distance partners *do* to maintain their relationship, by putting the emphasis on *imaginative* aspects of relationship maintenance. By taking symbolic interactionism as the main theoretical framework to interpret data, the studies included in the articles deal with the imagined partner (Article II), imagined time (Article III), the idealized partner (Article IV), and the internalized social norms the long-distance partners conform to (Article I).

1.1. Layout of the Thesis

After the introduction, an overview of previous research on long-distance relationships and other relationship arrangements where partners do not share a household is provided in *Section 2*. The central aim here is to map long-distance relationship arrangement in relation to other similar non-residential relationship arrangements. *Section 3* introduces the main theoretical framework of the thesis, symbolic interactionism. Subsequently, the current scholarly discussion on what is the basis of relationship maintenance

today is presented in *Section 4*. In addition, a more thorough discussion on what is meant by an intimate relationship in this thesis is given. In *Section 5*, the methodological choices of the study are described and discussed, including the choice of study method, the recruitment process, the interview process and data analysis. The ethical considerations and the role of the researcher are also reflected upon. The *Kappa* concludes with a summary and discussion of the findings as well as with suggestions for further research in *Section 6*. The four articles this thesis is based on can be found at the end of this book.

2. Previous Research on Non-Residential Relationships

In this section I will position long-distance relationships among other relationship arrangements in which partners do not live in the same household. Then, I will question whether not sharing a home with the intimate partner is just a stage towards cohabiting. Finally, I will give an overview of previous research where LDRs are compared with geographically close or cohabiting relationships.

2.1. Long-Distance Relationships among Other Non-Residential Relationships

There are two major problems regarding defining and, thus, describing non-residential relationships or intimate relationships where partners do not live in the same household or in the same geographical area. First, there are a number of terms used to describe the phenomenon and these terms partly overlap but still refer to slightly different relationship arrangements. The terms used depend on the academic discipline (such as sociology, psychology, demography or communication studies) the research was conducted in. Second, because intimate relationships are often perceived to be closely linked to the notion of household, information about couples living apart is scarce compared to households for which there is much data available.

“Once a phenomenon is given a name, i.e. once there is a label for it, it is easily recognized,” argue Irene Levin and Jan Trost (1999, p. 280). However, there are several terms used to define intimate relationships when partners live apart. The term *living apart together* or LAT relationship (e.g., Haskey & Lewis, 2006; Levin, 2004; Levin & Trost, 1999) relates to a couple that does not share a home. Each of the partners has their own home and yet they define themselves as a couple and so do others as well. This term, according to Levin and Trost (1999; cf. Borell, 2003), is indeed recognized and used in the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden (e.g., *särbo* in Swedish and *særbo* in Norwegian). If the partners live far from each other, the relationship is called a long-distance LAT relationship. Another set of widely used terms are *long-distance dating relationships* (e.g., Stafford & Merola, 2007; Stafford, Merolla & Castle, 2006), *long-distance romantic relation-*

ships (e.g., Pistole & Roberts, 2011), but often simply *long-distance relationships* (e.g., Cameron & Ross, 2007; Dainton & Aylor, 2001, 2002; Guldner & Svensen, 1995; Sahlstein, 2004; Stafford, 2005). Finally, a term that is frequently used is *commuting couples* or *commuters* (e.g., Bergen, 2010; Gerstel, 1979; Magnuson & Norem, 1999; Reuschke, 2010; Rhodes, 2002), meaning couples who meet on a regular, often weekly, basis. Commuting couples or commuters are also often linked to the term *dual-career (commuting) couples* (Jackson, Brown & Patterson-Stewart, 2000), as pursuing a career may mean a relocation for one or both of the partners. Other, though less frequently used terms in literature are *bilocal relationships* (Dorbritz & Naderi, 2012) and *multi-household families* (Borell, 2003).

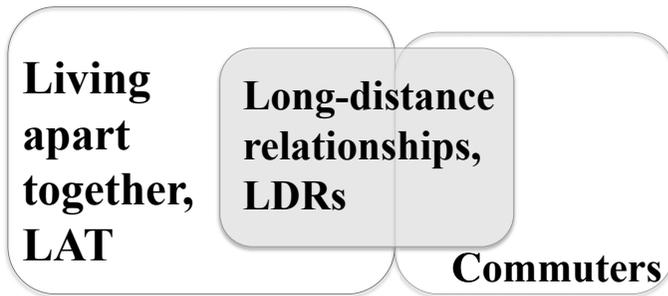


Figure 1. Main terms used to describe non-residential relationships and their relationship to one another as seen by the author/ as discussed in the literature.

Figure 1 illustrates the three main terms used to describe relationships when a couple relates over distance: living apart together, long-distance relationships and commuters. As the figure indicates, the main differences are between the terms living apart together and commuters. First, commuter couples usually share one main home (one or both partners might have another residence for the times away), while LAT couples do not. When talking about LAT relationships, there are various reasons mentioned in the literature for non-cohabiting, such as a wish for personal autonomy, employment in different places, or not being ready yet for cohabiting. When discussing commuters, on the other hand, the emphasis lies on the career as the main reason for geographical separation. Second, while LAT partners might live and work in the same area, commuters do not (and this is precisely the reason why they commute). Third, while the term LAT includes non-married couples, it seems, after reviewing previous research, that research on commuters is mostly about married couples (e.g., Gerstel, 1979; Jackson et al., 2000).

The term long-distance relationship shares some characteristics with both terms living apart together and commuters. The term refers to an intimate relationship over geographical distance, that is, the couple might share one

main home and might be either married or not married. The main emphasis of this term is on the geographical distance separating the partners. Thus, long-distance relationships can be seen as a more inclusive term when compared to commuters and its main focus is on the geographical distance and not the non-cohabitation per se, unlike the term LAT. However, the frequency and regularity of meetings make the relationship maintenance different from commuters. While commuters usually meet on a weekend or bi-weekend basis, LDR partners meet less often and less regularly.

There is a divide in the use of these concepts among the academic disciplines. The interest in and usage of the term long-distance (romantic/dating) relationships have traditionally been in psychology or communication studies (e.g., Sahlstein, 2004, 2006; Stafford, 2005, 2010). In sociology and in demography, on the other hand, the scholarly interest currently is in studying LAT relationships (e.g., Duncan & Phillips, 2011; Haskey & Lewis, 2006; Levin, 2004). In sociology, Mary Holmes (2006) has been explicitly interested in intimate relationships over distance or, as she names them, distance relationships.

For the purpose of this thesis, when defining a long-distance intimate relationship, I deliberately use the word “intimate” instead of “romantic” as the latter word has a connotation of being somewhat idealized and unreal. I also avoid using “dating” as that would imply a stage in relationship development, i.e. not being serious about the relationship yet. Hence, I choose to use the word “intimate” to distinguish intimate relationships from other relationships that individuals have with significant others (such as long-distance friendship or a parent-children relationship over distance). Having said that, I am aware that “intimate” relationships may imply having a sexual relationship, which may not always be the case. Instead, I see intimacy as a multi-dimensional relational quality of which bodily experiences are just one dimension. Finally, in this thesis I have chosen not to abbreviate “intimacy” to avoid confusion with a set of similar terms used to describe relationships that are maintained over distance.

2.1.1. Defining the Distance

As the term long-distance relationships already suggests, the main peculiarity of this relationship arrangement is that it is maintained over geographical distance. But when does the distance become a long distance? When can long-distance relationships be distinguished from living apart together relationships? In previous research, different criteria and definitions have been used. Some studies have used linear measures of distance that separate the partners, such as 50 miles (Kelmer, Rhoades, Stanley & Markman, 2013; Le & Agnew, 2001), or the frequency and length of the time that a couple is geographically separated, e.g. at least one week of separation each time (Jackson et al., 2000) or at least four days at a time (Gross, 1980).

However, the majority of studies on LDRs tend to avoid defining distance in numeric measures. In some studies the individuals decided themselves if they are in a long-distance relationship (e.g., Lee & Pistole, 2012; Sahlstein, 2004, 2006), or the respondents had to confirm that they cannot meet their partners every day due to geographical distance (e.g., Guldner & Swensen, 1995; Maguire, 2007; Pistole, Roberts & Chapman, 2010; Stafford et al., 2006).

Pistole and Roberts (2011), after reviewing previous research on long-distance relationships, suggested an LDR index that consists of seven statements previously used in literature as single defining statements:

1. My partner does not live in my close geographical area.
2. My partner lives far enough away from me that it would be very difficult or impossible for me to see him/her every day.
3. I consider my relationship to be a long-distance/commuter relationship.
4. My partner and I live at least two nights each week apart from each other.
5. We are employed/ attend college in different cities, and each maintains a residence in the city in which we are employed/go to school
6. My partner and I are unable to see each other, face-to-face, on a frequent basis.
7. I live 25 miles or more from my partner.

The respondents had to rate the items on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly) agree to 7 (strongly disagree). Higher scores indicated a long-distance relationship and lower scores indicated a geographically-close relationship. Pistole and Roberts (2011) found that it was the self-definition of being in a long-distance relationship (statement 3) and three other statements concerning an external barrier for frequent face-to-face meetings (statements 2, 5 and 7) that contributed uniquely to the qualification as a long-distance or a geographically-close relationship. Having these findings in mind, it seems reasonable for the qualitative research design of this study to rely on the interviewee's self-definition of being in a long-distance relationship.

2.2. Is Living Apart a Stage in the Relationship Development?

The second problem of studying intimate relationships that are maintained over distance is the scarcity of information about them. To my knowledge there are no statistics available on the numbers of long-distance relationships in any country because usually studies inquire about marital status and not relationship status, offering to choose between “married/cohabiting” and “single.” Furthermore, “[s]ocial researchers have largely shared this understanding of intimate relationships, operating with a tripartite model of relationships in which people are single, cohabiting or married” (Roseneil, 2006,

p. 1; Strohm, Seltzer, Cochran & Mays, 2009). Hence, people who are not married but are in a non-residential relationship would be statistically labelled as single, and would be seen by many scholars as not in a committed relationship yet. Referring to the impact of Talcott Parsons in sociology and in interpreting family life, Klas Borell (2003) argued that “family research of the 1950s and 1960s equated the modern family with the nuclear family” (p. 471). Borell (2003) further reasoned that there is a mismatch between the socially accepted and existing family and relationship forms and the scholarly awareness of them, on the one side, and quantitative research and statistics that we know about them, on the other side:

In contemporary family research this [Parsonian] theoretical framework has vanished, but despite this, the correspondence between family and household still constitutes a point of departure that is taken for granted. The unit of analysis in numerous family studies is, in fact, the household rather than the family, and statistics on families are often constructed through the compilation of data collected from surveys of households. The explicit tenets of Parsons’ work have become implicit in contemporary family studies and, in this respect, the continuity between the old and the new in family research is greater than one would at first believe (p. 472).

Recently, however, a few studies have tried to investigate the issue more deeply and showed that the number of couples not living together is quite considerable: up to 40% (!) of those who would traditionally be referred to as “single” are in a relationship (see for instance Haskey and Lewis (2006) for UK; Levin and Trost (2003) for Norway; Strohm et al. (2009) for the USA and Trost & Levin (2000) for Sweden). Having conducted a comparative study of LAT relationships in Europe, Liefbroer, Seltzer and Portman (2012, 2015) found that LAT relationships are more prevalent in Western European countries than in East European countries, except for Russia where LAT arrangements are as widespread as in some Western European countries.² Liefbroer et al. (2015) showed that up to 5% of adults in Eastern Europe and up to 10% of adults in Western Europe are involved in a LAT relationship. Sensibly, these numbers include long-distance relationships as well. Given that increased human mobility, migration and modern technology allow one to find a potential partner from anywhere in the world more easily than before, it is likely that long-distance couples constitute a considerable number of these statistically non-recognized relationships.

Irene Levin (2004) suggested that the emergence of couples who do not live together is strongly linked with the acceptance of non-married cohabita-

² Liefbroer and colleagues (2012) compared seven countries: Austria, France, Germany representing Western Europe, and Bulgaria, Romania, Russia and Georgia representing Eastern Europe. Data were collected between 2004 and 2008. In the study from 2015, three more countries were added (Lithuania, Hungary and Norway) and Belgium was studied instead of Austria.

tion and the changes in social norms: “[t]he question considered here is whether two people may be considered to be a couple *without* having a common home. In recent times the answer has become ‘yes’ and a new family form has appeared” (Levin, 2004, p. 224; emphasis in the original). Strohm and colleagues (2009), however, have opposed this suggestion, referring to studies conducted in southern Europe where cohabitation is uncommon but non-residential intimate unions occur. In addition, Strohm and colleagues’ (2009) study provided some support that LAT relationships are more common among homosexuals (more among gay men than heterosexual men but equally among lesbian and heterosexual women). Strohm et al.’s findings, therefore, indicate that in some cultural contexts living apart together or having a long-distance relationship may be the only possible relationship arrangement for some if they want to continue their relationship.

Strohm and colleagues (2009) argued that it is the ambiguity about whether a couple is living apart together or having a less committed relationship that explains the lack of information about LAT relationships (p. 203). The authors discovered that survey questions in previous research about the LAT status used the following terms: “main romantic involvement,” “a relationship partner,” “an intimate relationship,” or “a regular partner.” It is unknown, they argued, if individuals involved in LAT relationships identify themselves with these terms and if these terms allow a distinction to be made between committed and less committed LAT partners. Besides, in some studies LAT relationship was compared with a “marriage-like” relationship. In the view of Strohm et al. men and women may interpret the meaning of “marriage-like” differently, while “intimate relationship” suggests a sexual relationship which older individuals may not feel so comfortable being asked about.

Duncan and Phillips (2010) asked in their article: “what is the difference between [having] a boyfriend or girlfriend, especially one who is ‘special’ or long term, and living apart together?” (p.117). The authors argued that on one hand a LAT relationship is more prevalent among young people (cf. Liefbroer et al., 2015; Régnier-Loilier et al., 2009; Strohm et al., 2009) and, thus, living apart together could be seen as preceding a cohabiting relationship or as a stage in the relationship development. On the other hand, Duncan and Phillips (2010) argue, it is complicated to differentiate between (a) a LAT relationship as a prelude to cohabitation and (b) a LAT relationship where there is a conscious decision to keep separate households. The discussion by Duncan and Phillips highlights the complexity of recognizing a relationship today in the absence of formal markers such as marital vows or cohabitation. Liefbroer et al. (2015) found that LAT arrangement could be seen as a stage among younger partners for whom living together is either considered as “too early” or not possible because of practical constraints. For divorced and widowed persons and for those with children from previous

relationships, on the other hand, LAT relationship is a choice and, thus, could not be seen as a stage.

Based on a statistically representative sample of the British population over 18, with a sub-sample of people living apart from their (self-defined) partner, Duncan and Phillips (2010; 2011) found that around 40% of LATs could be seen as dating relationships. Dating LAT partners were respondents who lived apart from their partner because cohabiting was considered as “too early” or they were “not ready” to cohabit yet. The respondents who gave other reasons for living apart from their partners were considered having “partner LATs.” Having included these two different definitions of LAT partners, Duncan and Phillips (2010, 2011) found that half of dating LAT partners were distributed among the youngest group (aged 18-24), suggesting that a LAT relationship is just a stage that would develop into a more “committed” relationship. Yet, they also found that 40% of partner LATs were among the youngest group too. Thus, Duncan and Phillips (2010) argued, “the youngest adults can also consider themselves as belonging to a couple, and that it would be a mistake to describe LATs of this age as simply ‘boy/girlfriends’ on a priori grounds alone” (p. 122). On the contrary, as Haskey and Lewis (2006) claim:

It is not possible to identify it [LAT] as a particular ‘stage’ in the partnership history of the individual. Indeed, in all probability, LAT is further complicating the already complex patterns of partnership that are increasingly experienced over the individual’s lifecourse (p. 40; cf. Asendorpf, 2008).

Figure 2 illustrates some of the possible transitions between different forms of partnership suggested by Haskey and Lewis (2006). The figure shows that individuals only start from the same point of departure (namely, being single/unpartnered). Later, throughout their life course, individuals can have numerous partnership arrangements. Moreover, these partnership arrangements can occur in very different sequences.

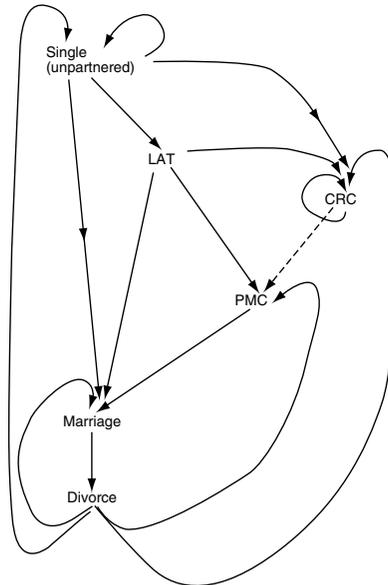


Figure 2. Possible transitions between different forms of partnership

LAT- Living apart together

CRC – Co-residential cohabitation

PMC - Pre-marital cohabitation (assumed co-residential)

An arrow circling a given state indicates a continuation in that state (rather than a transition out of it)

Some reverse transitions are also possible: from CRC to unpartnered, from CRC to LAT, and from LAT to unpartnered.

The dotted line denotes the difficulty in distinguishing CRC and PMC as two separate stages

Source: Haskey and Lewis, 2006, p. 41

Even though Haskey and Lewis (2006) have in their figure attempted to illustrate the complexity of different relationship developments including some reverse transitions, they still have not avoided the presumption that relationships follow a linear development (from a less to a more committed or at least more binding relationship). Therefore I would, first, replace the one-direction arrows in the diagram with bi-directional arrows as couple relationships can also move back and forth between the stages (see also Asendorpf, 2008). A number of previous studies have exemplified the non-linearity of relationship development, e.g. Levin and Trost (1999; 2000) give examples of couples who decided to live apart and remain in a relationship after having lived together. Examples of this can also be found in the sample description of this dissertation where couples transit from cohabiting to long-distance arrangements and then again to cohabiting relationships. Second, it is merely a normative assumption that two *single/unpartnered* individuals initiate relationships. As the sample of the current thesis will show, and as

our individual experiences or heard rumours indicate, individuals not always conclude their relationship before entering a new one.

2.3. Non-Residential Relationships Versus Residential and Geographically-Close Relationships

Long-distance relationships are not a new phenomenon in Latvia or in other parts of the world. Relationships where partners had to be separated for shorter or longer periods of time have always existed, for example: Odysseus, deep-sea sailors, war or prison-related separation. The social non-acceptance of non-marital cohabitation created another situation for temporary long-distance arrangements (see, for instance, Douglas (2011) or Lyons (1999) for analysis of love letters between engaged partners in the 19th century in Sweden and France, respectively). One of the most famous sociological accounts of long-distance family relations probably is *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* by William Isaac Thomas and Florian Znaniecki (1996) in which the letters of Polish migrants to their family members back in Poland were analysed. Yet, while the phenomenon has existed, the concept of describing such a relationship arrangement, namely long-distance relationships, is rather recent. Thus, in this review as well as in the thesis in general, I focus on recent long-distance intimate relationships where one can speak of some levels of choice by both partners to maintain the relationship over geographical distance.

Given that the terms used in previous studies are not fully interchangeable (living apart together, commuters and long-distance relationships), the results of previous research have to be compared with a certain caution. I have made a choice not to include studies on similar types of partnerships where couples spend significant periods of time apart, such as sailors' families or couples where one of the partners is away due to entertainment or sports business, as those families seem to be different in the power positions and readjustments during the reunions, as well as in regard to the seasonality of reunions (see Gerstel and Gross (1984, pp. 158-182) for a comparison of merchant marine and commuter couples, and Ortiz (2011) for an illustration of what it means to be a wife of a professional athlete).

Although long-distance intimate relationships would logically emerge in major migration societies, studies in these contexts concern long-distance *family* relations (see for example Landolt and Da (2005) for China; Hirsch (2003) for Mexico; or Fall (1998) and Tall (2008) for Senegal). Most of the research on non-residential couples has been conducted in the Huntingtonian Western world. Usually, research on LDRs is conducted in decentralized countries such as the United States (Kelmer et al., 2013; Strohm et al., 2009), the UK (Duncan & Phillips, 2010, 2011; Haskey & Lewis, 2006;

Holmes, 2006; Roseneil, 2006) or Germany (Asendorpf, 2008; Dorbritz & Naderi, 2012), but also in France (Regnier-Loilier et al., 2009), Belgium (Lyssens-Danneboom et al., 2013) and Australia (Reimondos, Evans & Gray, 2011; Upton-Davis, 2012). A strong research tradition has also been developed in Sweden and Norway (Ghazanfareon Karlsson & Borell, 2002; Karlsson & Borell, 2005; Levin & Trost, 1999; 2003; Trost & Levin, 2000). Therefore, the review of previous research is dominated by the view from the West.³

2.3.1. Profile of Non-Residential Couples

In the context of changes in the family and relationship structures, one may wonder if long-distance couples are somehow different from geographically close ones. Naomi Gerstel and Harriet E. Gross (1982) in their review of studies about commuter marriages claimed that from a socioeconomic point of view commuting is a “middle-class” phenomenon and that a “large majority of these spouses are well-educated, affluent professionals” (p. 74). They explained this middle-class trend both by the fact that commuter spouses are committed to their careers but their job locations are not in the same area, as well as by the fact that commuting and maintaining two residences is costly. A middle-class phenomenon hypothesis was confirmed by another review carried out ten years later: Anderson and Spruill (1993, in Rhodes, 2002, p. 399) found that (a) a majority of these long-distance spouses were well educated; (b) almost all were professionals, executives, or graduate students; (c) the mean age of these couples was mid to late thirties, with an age range of 25 to 65; (d) 40% to 50% had children; and (e) more than half had been married for nine years or longer. A study conducted by Levin and Trost (Levin & Trost, 1999, 2003; Trost & Levin, 2000) on LAT relationships in Sweden and Norway, on the other hand, showed that living in separated households occurs across the whole society (see also Duncan & Phillips, 2011; Haskey & Lewis, 2006), yet, “a good financial situation makes it easier to maintain two households and certainly simplifies long distance” (Levin & Trost, 1999, p. 291; Winfield, 1985). The difference between the findings could be explained by the different relationship arrangements (commuters and long-distance relationships vs. living apart together) studied, where a long-distance arrangement might indeed require more financial resources.

Half of the sample in the studies reviewed by Gerstel and Gross (1982) were academics. The authors reasoned that this could partly be explained by the snowball sampling technique used by the researchers as well as by the fact that for academics it is easier to maintain a distant relationship due to the flexible work schedule (cf. Holmes 2004; Stuck & Ware, 2005). Yet, one could also argue that the academic job market requires accepting an academ-

³ For a more East European context, see Article 1.

ic position at a university in a different city or country, which implies a high probability for LDRs in academia (Stuck & Ware, 2005).

Given that having children brings qualitative changes in a partnership, usually when non-residential couples are studied, study samples include couples without shared minor children (Rhodes, 2002, p. 399). For example, Holmes' (2006) study showed that, although it is of course possible to have children in a distance relationship, child rearing is challenging and puts parents in unequal positions. Jackson and colleagues (2000) found that while more grown-up children were not affected by commuting parents, the smaller ones sometimes experienced anger and felt neglected.

Non-residential couples may experience their relationship differently. Gross (1980) made a distinction between two types of dual-career couples who live apart: those who are adjusting to their situation and those who are accustomed to distance. Younger couples or "adjusting" ones showed to have a harder time maintaining their relationship due to the lack of what Berger and Kellner (1964, p. 15) has called "maritally defined identity" which involves interdependence between the partners developed through partners' adaptation to married life:

[T]heir marriages have not endured long enough to exist as a solid reality. (...) As marital partners, they are still conscious of themselves in the process of creating a sense of "We-ness" and cannot yet count on a set of shared experiences to act as an emotional reservoir from which to draw. (...) Because they have not as yet successfully created a marital unit involving two professional careers, they are not at all convinced that they will be able to (Gross, 1980, p. 573).

The older or "established" couples, on the contrary, had "built up a sense of common identity" (Gross, 1980, p. 574) that made the separation easier. However, Gross (1980) found that also "established" couples were "*coping* with the lifestyle more than enjoying it" (p. 574; emphasis added), thus indicating that even though the geographical separation is agreed upon, it still may be experienced as a challenge for the couple (see also Régnier-Loilier et al., 2009). Coping with, rather than enjoying the commuting relationship also indicates that for such a relationship to be maintained, it has to be worked on and custom-made practices of intimacy have to be developed. Gerstel and Gross (1984, pp. 141-148) added a third commuter type - "balancing" couples - where initially it is (usually) the husband whose career is prioritized, but after the children have grown up it is the wife's "turn" to take a job further away, thus "balancing" the career opportunities of both partners over the life course.

Levin and Trost (1999; Levin & Trost, 2003; Trost & Levin, 2000), having conducted a large qualitative study on living apart together based on in-depth interviews with about one hundred LAT couples in Sweden and Norway, distinguished LATs based on the voluntariness of being in such a part-

nership arrangement: those who would live together if they only could; and those who would not live together even if they could. The reasons why couples could not live together even if they wanted to were usually that they worked or studied in different locations (cf. Duncan & Phillips, 2011), or that they had minor children from previous relationships at home and/or cared for others. The reasons why some couples wanted to maintain separate residences, according to Levin and Trost (1999), were: (a) previous negative experience with cohabitation in previous relationships; (b) previous negative experience with cohabitation in the current relationship, so, in order to keep the relationship ongoing, they live apart together; (c) willingness to keep their separate homes and free time for others (mainly among elderly couples), and (d) considering their LAT arrangement to be a test before the cohabitation.

For the reasons for living apart together, a study by Liefbroer et al. (2012) gives an insightful East-West comparison. Table 1, taken from this study, shows that the majority of LAT couples live in such an arrangement for practical reasons, while a minority (although increasing with increasing age, and more prevalent in Germany and France) lives apart for reasons of autonomy and independence. The study by Liefbroer and colleagues also provides very interesting findings in relation to LAT in the Eastern European context. First, they found that in France and Germany the practicality of LAT was explained by employment-related reasons, namely partners have jobs in places too far away, thus, indicating geographical distance. In Eastern Europe, on the other hand, the reason for LAT arrangements was the absence of suitable and affordable housing (compare Article I).

Table 1. *Percentage of respondents who have a partner outside the household, categorised by reason, country and age (2004-2008)*

		Age			
		under 26	26-35	36-50	over 50
Austria	practical reasons	65.0	62.1	53.0	
	independence	9.3	17.4	31.0	
	not ready yet	22.7	14.6	8.5	
France	practical reasons	67.2	64.4	50.2	40.5
	independence	9.0	12.0	26.3	39.3
	not ready yet	12.6	10.0	11.5	10.7
Germany	practical reasons	58.2	43.4	41.8	34.8
	independence	11.6	23.8	33.2	43.5
	not ready yet	12.6	10.0	11.5	10.7
Bulgaria	practical reasons	59.8	59.4	56.0	59.5
	independence	9.4	15.8	24.0	21.6
	not ready yet	26.9	18.8	12.0	13.5
Romania	practical reasons	52.7	55.5	64.9	63.1
	independence	14.7	11.7	8.8	24.6
	not ready yet	27.3	30.	17.5	6.2

Russia	practical reasons	70.5	68.4	68.1	65.6
	independence	9.4	13.5	13.4	16.7
	not ready yet	15.0	10.1	6.4	4.0
Georgia	practical reasons	60.9	70.0	83.0	78.1
	independence	13.0	10.0	3.8	9.4
	not ready yet	8.7	10.0	5.7	0.0

Source: Liefbroer, Seltzer & Portman (2012, p. 14)

Another classification of LAT relationships has been provided by Sasha Roseneil (2006). She categorized LAT couples into three groups according to the partners' willingness to live together: a) the undecidedly apart, i.e. couples who have not yet made a decision about the cohabitation, b) the gladly apart, i.e. those who would not live together even if they could, and c) the regretfully apart, i.e. those who wish to live with their partner but cannot. In the current sample almost all respondents could be put into a category labelled 'regretfully *so far away* apart' even if they did not mind living apart as such.

In terms of values one may expect LATs to be more individual-oriented than partnership-oriented in comparison to individuals engaged in other coupleship arrangements (see, for instance, Karlsson & Borell, 2005). Hence, Duncan and Phillips (2010) in their survey asked respondents to choose between the following statements: (a) *Relationships are much stronger when both partners have the independence to follow their own careers and friendships*, and (b) *Partners who have too much independence from each other put their relationship at risk*. The majority chose the first statement. "In this sense," they concluded, the "majority opinion has already 'decentred' from traditional ideas of partnership, so there is little scope for LATs to act as some sort of individualising pioneers" (Duncan & Phillips, 2010, p. 124). However, 83% of individuals in dating LATs and 75% in partner LATs chose the first statement, in comparison to 66% of cohabitants, 63% of singles and 60% of married persons. LATs, unsurprisingly, were less likely to think that independence puts a relationship at risk. Strohm and colleagues' (2009) study showed similar findings for LAT partners in the United States.

2.3.2. Advantages and Disadvantages of Non-Residential Relationships

Some scholars argue that the individual in modernity is somewhat paradoxical; on the one hand, the individual wants to have autonomy and yet, on the other, still seeks intimacy in relationships (Bauman, 2003; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002; Illouz, 2014). In this context, previous research on non-residential relationships has shown aspects in which partners can meet this paradox. Non-residential relationships allow to combine both an intimate relationship and personal autonomy in terms of following a career,

pursuing education or hobbies or making a separation between the intimate relationship and other significant others. Rhodes (2002), among others, identified the following advantages of the commuting lifestyle that enable autonomy: (a) increased career opportunities (see also Magnuson & Norem, 1999), (b) professional autonomy and (c) increased independence (see also Karlsson & Borell, 2005; Stafford et al., 2006). The possibility of maintaining a relationship and of keeping one's own autonomy is a reason why Levin (2004) called the LAT arrangement a "both/and" situation that is developed to avoid the choice between either of the two. This means that LAT couples usually decide to take the job somewhere else *and* to continue the romantic relationship, instead of choosing one over the other. This view is also supported by other scholars (Gierveld, 2004; Gross, 1980; Holmes, 2004, 2006; Jackson et al., 2000; Levin & Trost, 1999; Winfield, 1985) who argue for the opportunity to create boundaries between a relationship and other important spheres of the individual's life enabled by non-residential relationship arrangements. Karlsson and Borell (2005) in their mixed-methods study showed that "the closer the geographical distance between the partners, the more complicated it becomes to establish boundaries" (p. 82), thus indicating that long-distance partners may enjoy more independence and autonomy than those involved in a geographically-close LAT arrangement.

Ghazanfareon Karlsson and Borell (2002) conducted their study on elderly LATs (60 years old and older) and found that the partners had separate finances and shared possessions or savings to a very limited degree (see also Gierveld & Peeters, 2003). Hence, they concluded that although a LAT relationship, like marriage, was based on mutual love, attraction and commitment, "LAT-relationships do not tend to lead to an increasing amount of common commitments or, expressed in another way, become more 'marriage-like'" (Ghazanfareon Karlsson & Borell, 2002, p. 19). Moreover, they argued that an LAT relationship could offer older divorcees, widows and widowers fulfilling intimate relationships and, in addition, it gives them room for autonomy and allows them to maintain their own previous social relationships.

Additionally, Ghazanfareon Karlsson and Borell (2002) argued that "above all" elderly LATs "are not prepared to accept a gendered division of labour in return for intimacy" (p. 23). The LAT arrangement has been shown to be beneficial to women in particular who previously would have followed their husbands but can now pursue their own careers. Thus, "[f]ew men, but many women, see advantages in LAT relationships. Therefore the woman is usually the active one in suggesting to move apart" (Levin, 2004, p. 238; Ghazanfareon Karlsson & Borell, 2002). A later article by Karlsson and Borell (2005) also showed the importance for elderly women of keeping their own home as a self-managed boundary-making opportunity.

The LAT arrangement provides autonomy not only to each partner, but also to the couple. Karlsson and Borell (2005, p. 79) argued that while co-

habiting partners have certain societal obligations with regards to what couples *ought* to do, LATs do not have such social requirements (yet) and therefore can individually decide on their own family/relationship practices:

In our culture, kinfolk have traditionally been made up of a combination of blood relations and in-laws, acquired through marriage, who together comprise a more or less integrated network. LAT relationships, on the other hand, have no culturally established praxis regarding such relationships.

However, although many LAT scholars agree on the increased degree of autonomy in LAT relationships, Régnier-Loilier et al. (2009) argued that for young people a LAT arrangement is a solution rather than a choice and it does not last long: “their desire for independence rarely withstands the demands of a pregnancy and the financial burden of two homes” (p. 85). Nevertheless, their findings are in line with other studies that argue that LAT relationships are a voluntarily choice for people in later stages of life after a divorce or widowhood.

Living apart, especially far apart, has disadvantages too. Rhodes (2002) listed the following disadvantages of a commuting lifestyle: (a) financial problems running two households (see also Magnuson & Norem, 1999; Stuck & Ware, 2005; Winfield, 1985), (b) loneliness (see also Gross 1980; Magnuson & Norem, 1999; Pistole et al., 2010), (c) lack of a personal and professional support system due to a lack of time to build and maintain such support (see also Jackson et al 2000; Stuck & Ware, 2005), (d) negative attitudes from friends, family, co-workers and society (see also Gerstel & Gross, 1982; Magnuson & Norem, 1999; Winfield 1985), (e) increased tension in the marriage and the family, (f) decreased satisfaction with sex life, (g) missed important family moments and day-to-day experiences and (h) lack of social life, hobbies and individual projects (cf. Stuck & Ware, 2005).

2.3.3. Relationship Quality

As the aim of this thesis is to understand how long-distance partners maintain their relationship over geographical distance, we should consider what has been said about the relationship quality in non-residential and long-distance relationships.

First of all, given the personal autonomy that living apart together grants and some of the disadvantages experienced by partners who live apart, one may wonder if LDRs “work.” In terms of relational *stability*, Stafford et al. (2006) found that about half of long-distance partners end their relationship before transiting to geographical close relationship and one third of those who remained together ended the relationship within three months after the reunion. Cameron and Ross (2007) found that LDRs are somewhat less likely to last than proximal relationships, and Asendorpf (2008) showed that a

living apart together is a less stable arrangement than cohabitation and marriage. These findings, however, have been contested by van Horn and colleagues (1997) who found LDRs not to be more likely to end within a three-month period than were geographically close relationships. Stafford and Merolla (2007) showed that LDRs are even more stable than relationships between geographically close couples but only as long as the partners remain geographically separated. They explained this paradox by the *idealization* of the partner that comes with the limited face-to-face meetings (see also Stafford & Reske, 1990). Kelmer and colleagues (2013) found that although long-distance partners had more optimistic future plans (having eventual plans for marriage and not considering a breakup), the actual behaviour showed that long-distance partners were as likely to break up as proximate couples.

In addition, it has been shown that LDRs do not differ from geographically close relationships concerning relationship *satisfaction* (Guldner & Swensen, 1995; Kelmer et al., 2013) and *intimacy* (Jiang & Hancock, 2013; Guldner & Swensen, 1995; van Horn et al., 1997). Moreover, long-distance partners indicate higher levels of experienced intimacy and faithfulness (Guldner & Swensen, 1995) than proximate partners. Gerstel (1979) found that distant partners are not more likely to be unfaithful to their partners than when they shared one household, thus arguing that the “physical proximity of spouses is not the characteristic of marriage which enables it to serve as a mechanism of social control” (p. 155). Winfield (1985) speculated that there could be even greater marital fidelity among commuters than among cohabiting couples, as infidelity would cause serious strains for the already demanding long-distance arrangement (p. 47). Ghazanfareon Karlsson and Borell (2002) argued that *because* LAT partners have neither legal nor family bonds with each other, the bond between the partners is about mutual emotional and moral commitment.

Long-distance partners are more satisfied with their *communication* (Kelmer et al., 2013; Stafford & Merolla, 2007), they tend to have lower levels of problems in communication (Kelmer et al., 2013; Stafford, 2010), and the communication is more intimate than that of proximate couples (Stafford, 2010). Rhodes (2002) in his review of LDR-research found that in LDRs there is less focus on disagreements (see also Kelmer et al., 2013; Stafford, 2010), and the frequency of arguments is also lower. Maguire (2007) suggested that the satisfaction with the relationship and communication depend on the certainty about the couple’s moving-together plans: the more certain the partners are about their future as a couple, the more satisfied they are with their relationship.

Dainton and Aylor (2001; see also Dainton & Aylor, 2002) suggested distinguishing between LDRs with no face-to-face contact in a normal week (which could be seen as “true” LDRs) and LDRs involving some face-to-face contact in a normal week (where partners could be seen more as com-

muters). They found that long-distance partners with some face-to-face contact did not experience more uncertainty about their relationship than proximate couples but were more certain about their future together than LDRs without face-to-face contact. Also Stafford and Merolla (2007) argued that couples with more frequent face-to-face contact are less likely to break up after becoming geographically close. Long-distance partners appreciate their time together more than geographically close couples (Bergen, 2010; Rhodes, 2002; Sahlstein, 2004).

Stability of the relationship has been shown to be related to *mediated communication*. Jiang and Hancock (2013) in their diary-based study showed that long-distance partners not only rely on more frequent and lengthier mediated communication but also “strategically orient their communication to be more disclosive, and the proportional increase of positive interactions further led to more idealized perceptions of partner disclosures” (p. 572). Yet, this might be merely perceived disclosure as Stafford et al. (2006) found that the majority of long-distance partners that became geographically close reported gaining new (both positive and negative) knowledge about their partners.

The present thesis contributes to the existing research on intimate relationships maintained over distance in various ways. First of all, it adds to the limited body of knowledge about LDRs and relationship maintenance over geographical distance. While sociological and demographical research has focused on living apart together as an emerging and establishing relationship form, this thesis examines a particular form of living apart together where the geographical distance between partners is significant over prolonged periods of time. Second, while LDR research so far has been mainly occupied by studies in psychology and communication studies, mostly concerned with relationship stability, this thesis attempts to position LDR research within the field of family sociology, in particular sociology of intimate lives. Thus, this thesis is concerned with *how* long-distance partners make their relationship continuous. By doing so, it adds a theoretical understanding of long-distance relationship maintenance. Third, the thesis sheds light on relationship research in the Eastern European area where emigration patterns increase the possibility of long-distance relationships emerging. It is the first study of LDRs in Latvia.

3. Theoretical Framework: Symbolic Interactionism

Intimate relationships can be analysed in terms of the institutions and structures that affect them, as well as in terms of individual practices or agency that align with or counter the structures. In this thesis I have chosen the latter approach. I have focused most on the individual as an active actor and less on the structures that influence her agency. Yet, I am aware and do not disregard the importance of structural aspects that may influence one's agency and meaning-making (Article 1). For this reason I have chosen the perspective of symbolic interactionism (SI) since it sees the individual and society as being in an intertwined union and not as separate poles. As with many theories that have been developed over time there is not just one form of symbolic interactionism (e.g. Denzin, 1992, pp. 8-15). Here, I lean towards SI as developed by Charles Horton Cooley, George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer.

In this section I am going to discuss the relevant concepts of symbolic interaction in relation to the thesis. Given that the included articles concern the internalized social norms, imagined partner, imagined time and the idealized partner and relationship, it is important to understand how individuals create meanings about each other and the social objects around them, and how they operate with these meanings.

According to Blumer, symbolic interactionism has three main premises: (1) human beings act toward things according to the *meanings* they have given to them; (2) meanings of things derive or arise from *social interaction* with others; and (3) these meanings are handled in and modified through an *interpretative process* (1959, p. 2, emphasis in original). These premises mean that the meanings and definitions of social facts are not given, neither are they innate, but they are socially created. The situations become defined as they unfold. Hence, some scholars, for example, stress the importance of mutual conversations in shaping and maintaining the identity of a couple. Peter Berger and Hansfried Kellner, in their article *Marriage and the Construction of Reality*, pointed out the crucial role of marital conversations that create a "maritally defined identity" (1964, p. 15). A few decades later Norbert Wiley, in his critique of Berger and Kellner's article, drew attention to the fact that the role of the family has changed, "yet the marital conversation goes on" (Wiley, 1985/1994, p. 39). Wiley argued that creating an indi-

vidual as well as a marital identity is a continuous process, and the conversations have become more emotional. Hence, symbolic interactionists do not reject the idea that there is an objective world “out there”; yet, how we define it and what meaning we give to it depends on our social interactions with others.

According to Charles Horton Cooley, one of the early developers of SI, individuals feel and act in accordance with how they *think* others see them, even if this image might be incorrect. Cooley’s most influential concept was that of the *reflected* or *looking glass self*. With this concept an individual observing others and their reactions to the individual’s actions is compared to someone looking at a looking glass. The reaction the person sees in others determines how that person will act thereafter. Hence, Cooley places emphasis on the role of imagination in the looking-glass self as it has three principal elements: “the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification” (Cooley, 1902/2009, p. 184). Furthermore, Cooley called on sociologists not to study phenomena “as they are” but how individuals imagine them: “The imaginations which people have of one another are the solid facts of society, and that to observe and interpret these must be a chief aim of sociology” (Cooley, 1902/2009, p. 121; emphasis removed).

However, the most prominent developer of symbolic interactionist thought was George Herbert Mead. One of the main contributions of Mead is the definition of *the self* that refers to the ability of a human being to be “an object to himself. The human being may perceive himself, have conceptions of himself, communicate with himself, and act toward himself” (Blumer, 1969, p. 62). To be an object to oneself is also an ability to take the role of others, to imagine how the interaction partner or others see the individual and, then, to act accordingly. The self is constructed in symbolic interaction with significant others (Mead, 1967), or those actors around the individual whose opinion the individual values.

The self consists of two parts, the *I* and the *Me*. The *I* is the innovative and expressive part of the self, while the social and reflexive part is the *Me*. Thus, the individual acts with reference to herself in the same way as she refers to the others (Mead, 1913), or, as Reynolds (2003, p. 76) puts it: “The ‘I’ represents the individual’s impact on society; the ‘me’ represents society’s influence on the individual.” This means that individuals not only learn the meanings of social objects through socialization, but they also create the meanings of the objects themselves through interaction. The importance of imagination and the role taking in the meaning making of long-distance relationships will be central in the present study. It will be shown how imagination – mutually created by the partners – is critical in seeing the relationship’s future and in maintaining the relationship beyond face-to-face interaction.

The interaction between the I and the Me takes place in the *mind*. According to Mead, the mind is not a thing; it is a process that consists of internal conversation, of symbolic interaction within the self (Milliken & Schreiber, 2012, p. 688). It is when one is considering alternatives and the future consequences of one's actions that the action is mindful. Hence, Mead saw individuals as conscious social beings and not as mere instruments that react in the same way to the same stimuli.

Symbolic interactionism can be seen as a dialectical social perspective that does not juxtapose agency and structure but rather incorporates them both (Musolf, 2003, p. 107). The struggle between the I and the Me is shown in Article I, *Do I Qualify for Love?*. The study analysed the complications in relationship maintenance experienced by long-distance partners in post-Soviet Latvia who are in a constant dilemma with regards to what they want to do and what they are supposed to do. These are everyday dilemmas for any individual and couple, but for long-distance partners this dilemma is made more complicated due to the geographical distance separating the partners. The complications were examined in the light of social norms as conceptualized by Parsons and Shils (1962)⁴ in their notion of dominant value orientations. Thus, although this thesis sees the individuals as having agency, it also sees the limits of their agency in terms of the culture they live in and the culture they have internalised. In Article I, these internalised norms were shown to differ depending on the generation the interviewees belonged to. Those who grew up under Soviet rule and those who grew up after the collapse of the Soviet Union, both now living in the same time-space, use different reference groups as perspectives (Shibutani, 1955). According to Shibutani, a reference group is the social world whose perspective the individual uses. The individual learns its rules, goals and values and defines the world through that reference group or social world. In either case, these norms, under certain conditions, make it difficult to maintain a (long-distance) relationship, although the causes of complications differ.

Despite the awareness of the structure, from the SI perspective individuals are seen as *active actors*: they define, use and apply situations and definitions as they act. Thus, SI is interested in the acts that individuals perform to affect others (e.g. impression management by Goffman, 1959), themselves (e.g. deep acting in Hochschild, 2003) or how the individuals deal with the structures that influence them. In this regard, important contribution to SI was made by Arlie Russel Hochschild (1979; 1990; 1996; 1997a; 1997b; 2003). She argues that our feelings and emotions are to a great extent social, i.e., they are guided by *feeling rules* that are socially accepted ways of how one should feel in given situations (Hochschild, 2003). In order to align

⁴ Parsons and Shils are not symbolic interactionists, though. Yet, the concepts developed by these structuralists do not prevent one from conducting interactionist analysis where the social norms are internalized in the "Me" part of the self.

one's own feelings to the feeling rules one employs *emotional work*. Hochschild has researched how individuals adjust their emotions and actions to externally imposed ideals and then internalised values, both in a corporate job environment (1997b; 2003) as well as in a family setting (1997a).

In this thesis, the main aim is to understand how long-distance partners act in their relationships and how they deal with the geographical distance separating them. Hence, the concept of "work" has been used to describe individual attempts to adjust to an intimate relationship that is maintained over geographical distance. This concept has been used in two articles: Article II, *Imagining the Absent Partner*, combines the concept of work with that of intimacy and analyses the 'intimacy work' or intimacy practices (Jamieson, 2011) performed by partners. The article examines reported interaction with the long-distance partner and, as discovered, with the imagined partner that has become part of one's self. The article investigates the intimacy practices that the interviewees use to develop and maintain intimacy with their long-distance partners over geographical distance. In this regard, Cooley claims that "an invisible person may easily be more real to an imaginative mind than a visible one; sensible presence is not necessarily a matter of the first importance" (1902/2009, pp. 95-96). However, Cooley adds, "the imagination, in time, loses the power to create an interlocutor who is not corroborated by any fresh experience" (1902/2009, p. 95). Thus, the long-distance arrangement is very interesting to study as it intertwines the necessity to imagine the partner who is somewhere else with occasional "fresh experiences" during face-to-face interaction.

Article III, *When Less is More*, looks at individual *time-work* strategies or attempts to manipulate temporal experiences. The theoretical point of departure is Mead's (1932/2002) notion of the subjectivity of time, as well as the present as the horizon or locus where the past is re-evaluated and the future is imagined. Flaherty in his work *The Textures of Time* (2011) suggests that time is not only passively experienced, but can be manipulated through time work.⁵ The concept of time work, Flaherty (2003, 2011) argues, integrates agency with temporality. Based on this concept, Article III aims to understand how long-distance partners manipulate their experience of time depending on whether they are physically together or apart.

To summarize how symbolic interactionism is used in this thesis I borrow from Denzin (1992, p. 20) who writes:

⁵ Although Flaherty, to my knowledge, is the most explicit scholar of time work, he was not the first not study individual attempts to influence the experience of time. Lee (1993), for instance, studied the process of "doing time" in prison where one does not 'own' one's time but has to adapt to the structured time. In her *Time Bind*, Hochschild (1997b) analyzed how young parents largely fail to manipulate and manage their time between work and family. On the one hand, she argues, we are "time architects" of our own time but, on the other, we tend to be victims of the structural time.

They [symbolic interactionists] study the intersections of interaction, biography, and social structure in particular historical moments. Interactional experience is assumed to be organized in terms of the motives and accounts that persons give themselves for acting. These accounts are learned from others, as well as from the popular culture. The motives, gendered and nongendered, explain past behavior and are used to predict future behavior. They are ideological constructions that create specific forms of interactional subjectivity in concrete situations. Power, emotionality, and force are basic features of everyday life. Intersubjectivity – the shared knowledge that exists between two persons regarding one another’s conscious mental states – is basic to shared, human group life. Intersubjectivity is established through shared emotional experiences that are temporally constituted.

Although the quote describes how *critical* symbolic interactionists should analyse the world around us, I think that it is compatible with the centrality of the self that consists of the I and the Me in human action. Thus, SI takes into account the environment individuals live in. However, it also looks at what the actors make out of that environment and what meanings they create. This approach of individuals as active actors will be used in defining intimacy and relationships in this dissertation.

4. Relationship Maintenance in Post-Modernity

In her book *Personal Life: New Directions in Sociological Thinking*, Carol Smart (2007, pp. 10-16) distinguishes four major debates around changes in family life: (1) ideas of the demise of the extended family and the rise of the 'modern' nuclear family (2) the decline of marriage as an economic contract and the rise of companionate relationships between spouses (3) the changing status of childhood and the growth of child-centeredness and (4) the decline of the nuclear family and the rise of fluid family practices. As far as this thesis is concerned, points 1, 2 and 4 are of interest.

I will begin this section with a discussion of views and arguments on how post-modern relationships have developed in the Western world in the context of secularization, capitalism and consequent individualization in society (points 1 and 2). Then, I will turn my attention to the fourth point and an alternative scholarly discussion on family and intimate relationships that focuses on how intimate relationships continue to be important and practiced - the discussion of what Smart (2007, pp. 32-52) calls "the cultural turn in the sociology of family life." Having done so I will explain in a more detail how the term 'relationship' has been used in this dissertation.

4.1. Intimate Relationships in the Context of Individualisation

Smart (2007) argues that the current scholarly debate around intimate relationships has a tendency to focus on the *decline* of the traditional family in the Western world, such as the decline in stable marriage or birth rates and the increase of individualisation. Female emancipation and the development of reproductive technologies have given women an opportunity to free themselves from their family men (mainly fathers and husbands) as sole providers, enabling women to spend energy on their jobs and careers and make child rearing at least in theory a voluntary act and, thus, the marriage less of a survival strategy. The development of contraceptive methods has made sex without reproduction possible, while reproductive science has made reproduction without sex possible (Almond, 2006). Moreover, along with the decline in marriage rates, marriage and love are neither mutually exclusive

nor eternal: we love and have sex inside and outside marriage; we marry later than previous generations did, we marry, divorce and marry again.

The view on the institution of family given by scholars who focus on the decline of the traditional family by analysing modern relationships are critical and even pessimistic. Families and intimate lives have been characterized as liquid (Bauman, 2003), fragmented (Almond, 2006) and chaotic (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1998; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995) argues that we have reached the post-familial family which is characterized by the de-institutionalization of family and increased individualisation. Furthermore, although modernity has granted individuals more freedom, this freedom to choose between partners or between partnership and independence creates what Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1995) call *precarious freedom*, meaning that freedom also implies more individual responsibility and consequences: “Quarrels start between married (and unmarried) couples when they realize there are other *options* - taking a job elsewhere, dividing up the chores differently, revising one’s family planning, making love to someone else” (p. 25; emphasis in original). Following a similar argument, Bauman argues that we live in a liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000) and that also love is liquid (Bauman, 2003). Liquid love means that love is unstable and unreliable. As modern individuals are supposed to be self-sufficient, the relationships between people are loose and easy to cut off. Bauman positions the love relationship in the consumer society in which products as well as individuals are consumed and exchanged without any long-term loyalty since one is always looking for something better “out there.” Referring to Erich Fromm who argues that in a culture where humility, courage, faith and discipline are rare, “the attainment of the capacity to love must remain a rare achievement” (Fromm, quoted in Bauman, 2003, p. 7), Bauman concludes:

And so it does - in a consumer culture like ours, which favours products ready for instant use, quick fixes, instantaneous satisfaction, results calling for no protracted effort, foolproof recipes, all-risk insurance and money-back guarantees. The promise to learn the art of loving is a (false, deceitful, yet keenly wished to be true) promise to make ‘love experience’ in the likeness of other commodities, that allure and seduce by brandishing all such features and promise to take the waiting out of wanting, sweat out of effort and effort out of results (Bauman, 2003, p. 7; cf. Bauman, 2007).

Moreover, any kind of investment in a relationship in such a liquid environment is unsafe “and bound to remain unsafe even if you wish otherwise” (Bauman, 2003, p. 15).

Similarly, Anthony Giddens (1992) argues that the discontinuity of traditional institutions – the loss of importance of a life-long marriage are examples of discontinuity - is one of the consequences of modernity. However,

his view on intimate relationships is rather optimistic. He is the inventor of the (widely criticized) term *pure relationships*. The modern relationship, in his view, is a pure relationship, entered into by two independent and, most importantly, equal individuals. According to Giddens, a pure relationship is democratic, equal, mutually satisfying (both sexually and emotionally) and disclosing. A pure relationship is continued “until further notice” (Giddens, 1992, p. 63) instead of “until death do us part” as the marriage vows promise. Although Giddens’ pure relationships seem to be appealing when analysing democratization of alternative relationship forms, such as homosexual relationships, the term has also met criticism as being too simplistic and generally too optimistic. It is argued that Giddens idealizes modern relationships; relationships nowadays are still far from being equal or disclosing (see for instance Evans, 2003; Illouz, 2007, 2012; Jamieson, 1998, 1999; Lewis, 2006).

Also Eva Illouz (2007, 2012) agrees that the traditional marriage practice is on the decline. However, Illouz does not stress the individualization thesis, but rather the capitalism and media that shape our views on relationships and relationship maintenance. In liquid modernity, an intimate relationship is maintained not from within as individuals may wish, but by external triggers that guide us in the form of popular media, consumer products or psychology self-help books (Illouz, 2007, 2012, 2014). Illouz argues that nowadays we live in an *emotional capitalism*, that is:

a culture in which emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other, thus, producing (..) a broad, sweeping movement in which affect is made an essential aspect of economic behavior and in which emotional life – especially that of the middle classes – follows the logic of economic relations and exchange (Illouz, 2007, p. 5).

In the emotional capitalism where emotive and economic drives are intertwined, human emotions become a commodity and are exploited in emotional labour (Hochschild, 1979, 1983/2003) where emotion is a part of paid work. For example, prostitutes sell not only sexual but also emotional experiences (Bernstein, 2007).

The reason for the commercialization of love, it is argued, is somewhat paradoxical: we not only aim to be autonomous, but also want to be loved and cared for. Moreover, love becomes “central to our happiness and identity” (Illouz, 2012, p. 6; Bauman, 2000, 2003; Beck & Beck-Bernheim, 1995, 2002; Illouz, 2007, 2014; Klineberg, 2012). These scholars argue that love is not only more idealized but also more difficult to reach. While some argue that these romantic markets are based on equality (Giddens, 1992), Illouz’s (2012) main argument is “that love circulates in a marketplace of unequal competing actors; and (..) some people command greater capacity to define

the terms in which they are loved than others” (p. 6; cf. Hirsch, 2007, pp. 93-106; Article I).

Popular media and broader therapeutic narratives produce an image of a perfect relationship, and the self-help books that are meant to be helpful for individuals in reality tend to put couples under more constraints when they do not fit the ideal of a “healthy relationship” (Illouz, 2007, 2014). Furthermore, individuals are being manipulated by romantic industries (Evans, 2003) that claim to offer a perfect set of products for a perfect couple experience.

The account above emphasizes the instability of intimate relationships in comparison to the stability of the pre-modern family institution. One may wonder, then, how, in such an environment where investments in intimate relationships do not pay off (Bauman, 2003), love is idealized (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Illouz, 2012) and sexualized (Giddens, 1992) and relationships have a temporary character (Bauman, 2003; Giddens, 1992), it is possible to explain the maintenance of such a relationship where partners do not even meet each other on a regular basis. The discussion that will follow can be useful in explaining the personal narratives given by the interviewees of this study.

4.2. Sociology of Intimate Lives

Although the opinions vary about whether the importance of family and marriage has declined or whether it has changed, all the scholars mentioned above agree that intimate relationships remain important in individuals’ lives. The debate above indicates that despite the changes in institutionalized aspects of intimate relationships (e.g., cohabitation and re-marriage) that may indicate the instability, liquidity and chaos in intimate relationships, there is a necessity not to limit scholarly discussion to the framework of the family but to look at less institutionalized and yet practiced intimate relationship forms and practices. There have been several attempts in family sociology to change the focus of the corresponding research, for example, to look beyond households (Borell, 2003) as the concept of a household instead of a family requires co-residence and does not capture the complexity of close intimate ties. Roseneil and Budgeon (2004, p. 135) argue that “if we are to understand the current state, and likely future, of intimacy and care, sociologists should decentre the ‘family’ and the heterosexual couple in our intellectual imaginaries.”

The debate above shows that an intimate relationship as a unit has no definite frame, and thus it has become challenging for family and relationship scholars to define their scholarly focus. To solve the riddle with fuzzy terms and concepts, it is helpful to distinguish between what Blumer (1969, pp. 140-152) described as definite and sensitizing concepts. Definite concepts

refer to precise definitions with fixed attributes and/or fixed benchmarks that “provide prescriptions of what to see” (pp. 147-148). A household would be an example of definite concept. Sensitizing concepts, in contrast, “merely suggest *directions* along which to look” (Ibid., emphasis added). An intimate relationship would be an example of sensitizing concept as it may not always be clear what exactly is meant with “being in a relationship.” Blumer would argue that the fuzziness of concepts in social sciences might be perceived as a problem of social sciences. Social scientists, according to Blumer, should aim to solve this problem by careful and interpretative research through which the sensitizing concepts are explained and communicated. In the following I will present an alternative discussion of how an intimate relationship can be defined and studied, and will then describe how intimate relationship is defined in this dissertation.

In the recent two decades a string of theoretical contributions have been developed in an effort to capture the changed meaning that people give to relationships with people they care about. The following discussion aims to show individual’s attempts to create their own forms of intimate belonging and partnership. Furthermore, by giving their contributions as to how intimate lives could be perceived and analysed in scholarly discussions, following authors challenge the argument of individualization and de-institutionalization of the family discussed in the section above and they argue that the family-like relationship continues to be maintained outside strictly defined institutions such as marriage or the family. One could say that the scholars that are mentioned in the following discussion have taken a symbolic interactionist approach in discussing intimate lives since they focus on families and relationships not only as institutions but also as processes that emerge; as something that become defined and redefined in social interaction rather than being pre-given.⁶ These scholars attach importance to subjectively given and created meanings to the significant others one is related to. The approach that is based on everyday practices and self-created meanings in relationship creation and maintenance is central also to this thesis.

Family sociologist David H. J. Morgan, in his *Family Connections: An Introduction to Family Studies* (1996) claims that we cannot study *the* family for there is no *the* family any longer. Family (without *the*), Morgan argues, “represents a *quality* rather than a thing” (Morgan, 1996, p. 186, emphasis

⁶ Already early symbolic interactionists have taken this open-ended approach to intimate ties. For instance, Cooley’s concept of primary groups did not refer merely to household members but also to close friends and community, thus arguing for family as an open and inclusive institution where the primary focus should be on the actual family-like practices (see in Erickson, 2007). Family scholar Arlie Hochschild who has taken the critical SI approach in family studies, focused on the individual practices in families in relation to the external influences imposed to the family members. Hochschild (1997a, 1997b) illustrated how young parents attempt with varying results to apply their internalized values of gender roles to family settings and childcare.

added; cf. Mjöberg, 2009). Describing and focusing on *the* family would mean reproducing the idea of heteronormativity where the unit of analysis is heterosexual couples with their shared children. Instead, Morgan suggests studying and focusing on *family practices*. Morgan argues that “family is about process and doing and this, and more, is implied in the idea of family practices” (2011, p. 5). With family practices Morgan invites us to focus on the meanings that individuals give to a number of actions, events and practices that are family-like, including other significant others that might not fit into the definition of *the* family.

Following Morgan, other scholars have suggested their own developments on family practices. Janet Finch’s (2007) concept of *displaying families* builds on Morgan’s (1996) family practices. Her argument is that families need to be ‘displayed’ as well as ‘done’. By “displaying I mean to emphasize the fundamentally social nature of family practices, where the meaning of one’s actions has to be both conveyed to and understood by relevant others if those actions are to be effective as constituting ‘family’ practices” (Finch, 2007, p. 66; emphasis removed). In other words, Finch argues that we perform family practices not only to show to those we care for that they are important to us, but also to show the generalized others that we care for each other, thus, creating the boundaries between us, the family, and them, the non-family. The reason why this display is important is exactly because of the fluidity of the family structures discussed above. It is *because* families cannot be described in strict definitional terms based on legal membership that individuals tend to demonstrate or display their connectedness. Although the necessity to display families might be more important to non-conventional family forms, it is also important to conventional families especially when the stability of the family is challenged.

Smart (2007) invites us to widen our focus beyond the family and to talk about *personal life* as an attempt to break the boundaries of traditional white middle-class heterosexual families, and to include new and alternative forms of close relationships. This “terminology of personal life seeks to embrace conceptual shifts as well as empirical changes to social realities” (Smart, 2007, p. 28). By using the word *personal* instead of *individual*, Smart criticizes the individualization thesis of weakened human bonds (e.g., Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Klineberg, 2012). ‘Personal,’ according to Smart, means that those people around the individual are close to him or her and that there is no autonomous individual “who makes free choices and exercises unfettered agency” (2007, p. 28).⁷ She suggests that personal life could be compared to Mead’s (1934/1967) distinction of “me” that is the social part of the self and not the agentic ego “I” and, thus, the individual cannot be seen without relation to others. Smart’s concept of personal life pools five aspects of how personal life should be seen: imaginary, memory, biography,

⁷ This argument of close ties that set limits on one’s agency is further examined in Article I.

embeddedness and relationality. Thus, she combines the more externally-influenced ‘variables’ in one’s relationships (such as relationality, embeddedness and biography) with more subjective ones (such as imaginary and memory).

Another concept that contributed to the empirical and conceptual approach of this thesis is a concept that concerns the practices of intimacy as defined by Lynn Jamieson (2011). In her book *Intimacy: Personal Relationships in Modern Societies*, Jamieson (1998) takes a critical stance towards the contemporary illusion of intimacy that she describes as “an idealized version of personal life which gains ground previously dominated by a particular idealized version of ‘the family’” (p. 2). In addition, she argues that the western public discourse and narratives portrays disclosing intimacy as the correct one although the actual practices within families and relationships differ and are not always intended to have disclosing intimacy. Thus, in her 2011 article, Jamieson suggests *practices of intimacy* as a term that transcends the ethnocentrism of intimacy and that refers to “practices which enable, generate and sustain a subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special to each other” (p. 1).

Gabb and Silva (2011) argue that the concepts of family practices by Morgan, intimacy by Jamieson and personal life by Smart “are three strands of thinking which have been particularly influential in shaping and reorienting contemporary UK family and relationship studies over the past 15 years” (p. 2). These concepts have been very influential on this thesis as well. In the thesis the research approach builds on these concepts by, first, acknowledging the subjectivity in one’s experience of being in a relationship. Second, this thesis follows the active and self-definitional rather than prescribed notion of intimate relationships. Following the prescribed definition of a relationship, the recognition of long-distance relationships could be contested because one part of the dyadic union is not obviously observable to others due to the mere fact of physical absence. The choice for openness, actor-perspective and self-definition in defining intimate relationships will be further explored in the following.

4.3. Defining Intimate Relationships

“Theory is of value in empirical science only to the extent to which it connects fruitfully with the empirical world,” argues Blumer (1969, p. 143). The only connectors, for Blumer, are concepts that “point to the empirical instances about which a theoretical proposal is made” (Ibid.). To make a legitimate connection between the empiric social world of LDRs and the findings of the thesis, I will discuss now how the concept of the intimate relationship has been treated for the purposes of this dissertation, namely by arguing that there is a need for an actor-defined perspective on intimate relationships.

The actor-defined perspective on intimate relationships can first be explained by the previous proposals of family scholars to look at the relationships in a wider perspective, and to reconsider how we might have limited our view on people's relations and ties by our pre-given definitions (e.g., the non-recognition of non-residential relationships despite their high prevalence). The reliance on self-definition as a practice is also grounded in a symbolic interactionist perspective that individuals act according to their self-defined meanings, and thus the researcher should trust the informants and respect their explanations. Hence, in addition to seeing intimacy as a relationship quality that one has to work on for the relationship to be continuous, I follow the definition of intimate relationships given by Jamieson (2011):

Intimate relationships are a type of personal relationships that are *subjectively experienced* and *may also be* socially recognized as close. The quality of 'closeness' that is indicated by intimacy can be *emotional* and *cognitive*, with *subjective experiences* including a feeling of mutual love, being 'of like mind' and special to each other (p. 11; emphasis added).

By deconstructing Jamieson's definition, I make following arguments in relation to how intimate relationships are seen in this thesis and how this definition relates to the sample of this study:

- Intimate relationships are *subjectively experienced*. This statement also follows the foundations of symbolic interactionists that argue that, while the researcher herself is expected to be an outsider to the studied phenomena, research has to be conducted from the actor's point of view (Blumer, 1969, p. 3, pp. 35-56).⁸ By relying on the subjectively experienced relationships one can avoid missing experiences that 'objectively' may be not recognized as relationships because they do not follow some predefined criteria.
- Intimate relationships *may be socially recognized as close*, meaning that the subjective experience of being in a relationship may also be socially *not* recognized. Being recognized by others as a couple that lives apart has been set as a criterion to be included in some of the previous studies of LAT relationships (Haskey, 2005; Levin & Trost, 1999; Lyssens-Danneboom et al., 2013). However, being recognized by others as a couple would require employing practices that Finch (2007) called 'displaying families': the couple, then, would have to become publicly observable. However, as Article I will show, at least in a society where silent intimacy (Jamieson, 1998)⁹ is practiced and the level of interpersonal trust

⁸ See a discussion on the role of the researcher in Section 5.6.

⁹ The concept of silent intimacy is somewhat an opposite of Jamieson's (2011) 'disclosing intimacy', that is intimacy based on mutual disclosure of selves.

is low,¹⁰ the recognition of others is certainly a sign of a relationship, but it does not always match the self-definition and, thus again some of the individual experiences can be overseen.

The sample of the current study exemplifies that what individuals treat as a relationship does not always comply with objective criteria such as the length of the relationship or the number of previous dates or meetings. The self-defined notion of a relationship involves subjectivity as to whom we treat as our 'nearest and dearest' even if we do not display that to the rest of our everyday companions, and it opens up a new research field to scholars of intimate lives.

An unexpected but very insightful and thought-provoking outcome of the reliance on the self-definition of the sample was the relationship status of the interviewees. The recruitment question asked for individuals with "long-distance relationship experience." Six of the recruited interviewees talked about their past long-distance relationships with partners with whom they had separated. The concept of relationship also includes the aspect of *continuity* (Morgan, 2011; Sigman, 1991; Smart, 2007). Continuity here means that the relationship may be subjectively experienced as longer (or shorter) than the actual and externally observable interaction with the other person. Such was the case with four out of six interviewees: they were not in an objectively observable relationship with their long-distance partners anymore and, yet, in the recruitment online questionnaire they marked that they "*currently* are in a long-distance relationship" (emphasis added). Both Kalvis and Rasma, two of the interviewees, had broken up with their long distance partners. However, they still did communicate with their previous partners through mediated communication means, such as Skype or e-mail, and thus were still involved in mediated interaction. Two other interviewees on the other hand, Marina and Gatis, did not communicate with their long-distance ex-partners any longer but still gave the same answer in the questionnaire, namely that they were *currently* in a long-distance relationship. These four cases serve as examples of the complexity of defining contemporary relationships and the importance of subjective criteria that Jamieson called for at the beginning of this subsection. Furthermore, these examples warn us against using externally set criteria to determine when a relationship can be said to have ceased. Article II on intimacy practices shows that intimacy can be practiced also in solitude without a direct response from the long-distance partner. That may explain why Marina and Gatis, who were not even in con-

¹⁰ The World Value Survey shows low levels of interpersonal trust in Latvia, if compared with Sweden for example. The majority of respondents in Latvia to a question "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?" answered with "You can't be too careful." For a comparison, in Sweden, most respondents over the years answer with "Most people can be trusted."

tact with their long-distance partners we talked about during the interview, still *experienced* a relationship with them.

To conclude, by choosing the actor-defined approach as to what a relationship is, I agree with Régnier-Loilier and colleagues (2009) who end their article about living apart together relationships in France with the following statement:

This study of LAT relationships does not provide a definition of a couple; nor does it provide a means for counting them. Perhaps we should abandon, at least temporarily, the idea that an indicator must be “verified” or should be “objective” and allow the individuals concerned to report themselves as “noncohabiting couples,” “engaged in a serious unmarried intimate relationship” or in a “relationship without ties” (p. 106).

To summarize, an intimate relationship is here seen as a relational quality; it is *emerging*, it is *defined* and is *re-defined* in the individuals’ minds. It is equally important to stress that not only the relationship itself is an emerging process but also the closure of the relationship is a process and requires time. Finally, an intimate relationship is something that one works on through practices of intimacy.

5. Data and Methods

“The task of scientific study,” consistent with Blumer (1969, p. 39), “is to lift the veils that cover the area of group life that one proposes to study.” In this section I will discuss my methodological choices as to how to lift these veils. The section starts by giving arguments for the chosen qualitative study design and then continues with a presentation of the recruitment and interview process. The data analysis procedures are presented and validity and ethical issues are discussed. The section is concluded with a discussion on the limitations of the study.

5.1. The Choice of Method

In trying to understand a social phenomenon, one can measure *how many* people think or behave in one or another way, and that requires using quantitative research methods. One of the limitations of the quantitative research methods is that it measures what it asks for. Quantitative surveys usually have predefined multiple-choice questions, as quantitative researchers tend to see the world in terms of variables (Maxwell, 2013, p. 29). The consequences of the usage of marital status as a marker for an individual’s relationship status have already been problematized above: up to 40% of individuals who appear in statistics to be “single” actually might be involved in a relationship with a partner with whom they do not share a home.

A qualitative research design, on the other hand, aims to see the world from the viewpoint of the informant: it aims to understand how informants perceive this world and how they make sense of it. The qualitative research approach aims to understand meanings, particular contexts and processes, and to identify unanticipated phenomena and influences (Maxwell, 2013, p. 30). While the Iowa School symbolic interactionists rely on more positivist methodology, the Chicago School holds an interpretivist view, meaning that human action cannot always be measurable and thus requires interpretation in order to examine what Blumer (1969, p. 35) called the empirical social world. The empirical social world is the group life under the veils that the researcher attempts to lift: it is the human individual and collective experiences, actions and meanings on everyday levels.

5.2. The Recruitment Process and Sample Description

I have already argued for my decision to rely on research participants' own definitions of their relationships in Section 4.3. Here, I will present the technical description of the recruitment process and the sample.

This empirical study is based on 19 face-to-face semi-structured, open-ended, in-depth interviews with individuals with LDR experience. In the first recruitment stage in 2008 I conducted six interviews. In the second stage in August 2011 and January 2012 I conducted 13 additional interviews. In total I interviewed twelve women and seven men, aged from 22 to 60 years.

To recruit respondents, two recruitment sources in Latvia were used. First, I used the Latvian social network *draugiem.lv* where I primarily found young adults. Access to the online panel of the market research company *GfK CR Baltic* made it possible to diversify the sample in terms of interviewee's age, and to find more male respondents. I asked the panel members if they had experience of LDR and if they would agree to tell me about it in an interview. The recruitment question was formulated as follows: "Have you had a romantic relationship from a distance (or a long-distance relationship, when geographical distance between you and your partner was so great that you could not meet every day or whenever you wanted to)?" As mentioned earlier, it was up to the interviewee to decide if the relationship she or he was involved in was a long-distance relationship. None of the interviewees lived closer than 45 km from their partners, and none of them met more than once a week.

The research participants were at different stages in their long-distance relationship development; thus, they talked about their LDR experiences from different time/distance perspectives. Ten interviewees were engaged in a long-distance relationship at the time of the interview, and nine talked about their past LDRs: three had started cohabiting and six had separated from their long-distance partners. Twelve interviewees talked about their relationship that had been maintained over distance since it began, while the remaining seven had started geographically close relationships which evolved into long-distance relationships. One of the interviewees had minor children with her long-distance partner but this was not addressed further since the focus of the interviews was on the relationship and not on parenting. More detailed information on each of the interviewees can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. *Profile of the interviewees*

Pseudonym, sex, age, born	Year met the partner	Length of long-distance arrangement	LV-LV/ LV-abroad	Relationship development
Aija, f, 48, 1964	1986	4+10 years	LV-LV	Met FtF**, LDR, then married, cohabiting, now LDR
Karina, f, 30, 1978	2007	11 months	LV-abroad1/ abroad2	Met online, now LDR
Diana, f, 52, 1959	2011	6 months	LV-abroad	Met online, geographically close, now LDR
Kalvis, m, 34, 1977	2009	2 years	LV-abroad	Met FtF, geographically close, then LDR, now not in a relationship*
Elmars, m, 54, 1954	1998	2 years	LV-abroad	Met online, LDR, now married and cohabiting
Alise, f, 22, 1986		5 months	LV-abroad	Met online, LDR, then geographically close, now not in a relationship
Darta, f, 24, 1984	2004	2 years	LV-abroad	Met FtF, cohabiting, now LDR
Laima, f, 25, 1983	2007	1,5 years	LV-abroad	Met online, LDR, planning to move in together
Maija, f, 26, 1985	2008	2 years	LV-abroad	Met FtF, then cohabiting, now LDR
Marina, f, 60, 1951	1982/ 1983	5 years	LV-abroad	Met FtF, LDR, now not in contact*
Milda, f, 29, 1982	1996	2 years	LV-abroad	Met FtF, teenage love for 4 months. Then long-distance friends, now LDR, planning to move in together
Rasma, f, 55, 1956	2007	1,5 years	LV-abroad	Met online, LDR, now not in a relationship*
Gatis, m, 49, 1962	1996	15 years	LV-LV	Met FtF, LDR. Now not in contact*
Nikolay, m, 45, 1966	2011	6 months	LV-LV	Met online, now LDR
Inga, f, 55, 1956	2009	2 years	LV-LV	Met online, now LDR
Maxim, m, 38, 1974	1987	5 years	LV-abroad	Met FtF, then LDR, now married, cohabiting
Konstantins, m, 56, 1956	2001/ 2002	2 years	LV-LV	Relationship 1: Met online, LDR. Now not in contact
	Relationship 2: Met online, now married, cohabiting			
Imants, m, 24, 1988	2006	6 months	LV-abroad	Met FtF, then geographically close, LDR, then geographically close, now not in a relationship
Inese, f, 28, 1980	1998	10 years	LV-abroad	Met FtF, then geographically close, then LDR, married, continue LDR

Notes:

- The rows with a grey background indicate the interviews that were conducted in 2008. It explains the discrepancy between the given age and the year of birth.

- In the column "Relationship development" "now" means "at the time of the interview."

* - These interviewee's answered with "I am currently in such a [long-distance] relationship" despite "objectively" not being in a relationship. In two cases they were not even in contact with their ex-partner any longer.

** - FtF – face-to-face

The sample represents the migration patterns of people in Latvia in the last few decades. Gatis, Nikolay, Inga, Konstantins and Aija spoke about their long-distance relationships within Latvia, while the others talked about their cross-border relationships, with the greatest distance being between Latvia and other continents.

Maxim and Marina represent long-distance relationships that were formed during the Soviet Union, having met their partners in another Soviet republic. It was the marriage of Marina's long-distance partner that prevented them from planning any future together, but it did not prevent them from developing a romantic relationship through written correspondence. Maxim continued his relationship first in his partner's country and now in Latvia.

Milda, Inese, Imants and Diana represent long-distance relationships that have formed due to recent labour emigration from Latvia. They all had cross-border relationships with Latvians abroad whom they first met in Latvia. The partner of Rasma emigrated from Latvia to his ethnic country of origin, and they first met online. Karina, Maija, Kalvis, Alise, Darta, Elmars and Laima talked about their relationships with foreigners abroad.

Three of the interviewees talked about distant partners with whom they had adulterous relationships. Since I was following their self-definitions of a relationship, they were included in the sample, and their narratives did not differ significantly from the others. I happened to interview Kalvis, Marina and Diana because of their LDR experience. During the interview it turned out that they spoke of unfaithful relationships. Kalvis had been unfaithful to his wife, while Diana and Marina after their own divorces were dating men who were being unfaithful to their wives. These relationships that my informants talked about could be morally disapproved of because they involved being unfaithful to somebody else. Diana, being disappointed in her previous marriage, was now having a relationship with a married man. Yet, she still thought of her partner's wife and how not to hurt her.¹¹ All of them

¹¹ Diana "warned" me about the moral aspects of her LDR before the interview, thus, implying that others might disapprove her relationship. However, she cares little what society thinks about it and is willing to continue her relationship. Here is an excerpt of her e-mail to me while we were arranging the interview: "Since you most likely are interested in the real situation, it would not be right for me to make up or silence anything. I want to say that my man is married and now his family has also moved to [XX country]. The [geographical] distance has

were displaying their relationships (Finch, 2007) in some environments and friends' circles, but not in others; thus, they could be recognized as a couple by some but not by all. Marina and her relationship partner who was married had met just twice but continued their romantic relationship through the exchange of letters; thus, rather being related in their minds than having shared practices of intimacy in terms of a physical proximity.

5.3. Interview Process

All interviews were conducted face-to-face in Riga, Latvia. The language of the interviews was either Latvian or Russian. The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. All interviewees could decide on the place of the interview. Two interviews were conducted in private settings: one in the interviewee's home and one in the interviewee's car. Two interviews were held at the interviewees' empty offices, while all the others were conducted in a neutral public environment, namely quiet and non-crowded cafes where we did not have to fear other clients or staff listening to our conversation.

All interviewees were informed about the topic of research: long-distance relationships. However, they did not know what exactly I as a researcher was interested in. Initially, I had prepared a detailed interview guide, but this soon proved to be ineffective as most often the interviewees were open and eager to tell me about their experiences. Thus, the interview questions were later re-designed in the form of an open-ended conversation where I asked the main guiding questions and followed up by more precise questions if necessary. In my introductory words I explained the role of the respondent in the interview. After that, my interview questions covered the following topics: how the partners met; how their time together and time apart was spent; the interviewee's evaluation of their relationship; how they would characterize their mediated communication; ways of expressing attachment when together and when apart; the existence of conflicts or jealousy; future plans. Very often after the end of the formal interview, the interviewee and I would continue talking over a coffee. The information I received then was not recorded, but it informed my analysis through note-taking afterwards.

In regard to the researcher/interviewee power position, it was important for me to establish a conversation-like interview (Wilson & Sapsford, 2006, p. 95) where the interviewees chose what was important for them to tell about their long-distance relationship. This approach allows the researcher to

tested us and made us even closer, so now I also consider moving there so that we can be together. If you are not bothered by this moral aspect of our relationship, I am ready to talk about it as much as you want."

Kalvis also stressed that his long-distance partner was "something more" than a "lover." A lover, in his view, means that there is only "THAT relationship" between the two, meaning that the relationship is only sexual.

be explorative in the data collection process and does not limit the narrative with pre-given assumptions of what may be important. In practice, it meant that I had my interview questions in front of me and when it seemed that the topic had been closed by the interviewee, I either asked some follow-up questions or switched to the next uncovered topic. To keep an equal power position, I also always revealed to the interviewees that I had had my own LDR experience. Almost all interview situations started with the interviewees asking why I was interested in such a topic. It seemed especially important for older interviewees to ask this question as they felt that having a long-distance relationship was not a “classic” relationship experience.

5.4. Data Analysis

After each phase of fieldwork (spring 2008, summer 2011 and winter 2012) the audiotaped interviews were transcribed into a text file. Transcribing the interview material myself had many advantages. Most importantly, it meant that I was able to start writing memos and conducting initial data analysis while transcribing the material. It also allowed me to become very familiar with the interview material.

The data analysis procedure mainly relied on aspects of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2008). Grounded theory (GT) can be traced to the Chicago School and the development of symbolic interactionism as a reaction against the dominating functionalist theories and support for positivist research methods (Kendall, 1999; Milliken & Schreiber, 2012).¹² Like in everyday life, according to Chicago School symbolic interactionists, social researchers engage in role-taking in order to understand the research subject (Musolf, 2003, p. 109). Thus, the main challenge of qualitative research is to remain reflexive and to be as open as possible to the data. Yet, the new developments of grounded theory still acknowledge the researcher as someone who *constructs* data (Charmaz, 2006). The researcher is seen as a *Self* (Milliken & Schreiber, 2012) who is in a dialogue with data when explaining it.

From the GT approach I took the assumption that the data analysis is driven by data, meaning that it is an explorative process (Boulton & Hammersley, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2008; Kendall, 1999; Starks & Trinidad, 2007); and that data is gathered through theoretical sampling and the theory is built through a process of constant comparison. Theoretical sampling is a process of data collection where the analyst “jointly collects, codes, and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where

¹² However, see Holton (2007, p. 269) for a counterargument that one should not ignore the influence of Barney Glaser’s training in quantitative methodology in the development of grounded theory.

to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2008, p. 45). The constant comparison method means generating concepts and the theory through the process of “comparing data with data, data with category, category with category, and category with concept” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 187).

The first six interviews from 2008 were used for initial coding, category building and for creating more elaborated themes for the following interviews through theoretical sampling. Kathy Charmaz (2006) argues that the aim of the initial coding is to “separate data into categories and to see *processes*” (p. 51; emphasis added).¹³ For data analysis and constant comparison, the free RQDA data analysis software was used, allowing the data to be retrieved and compared in line with themes common to all cases. The software enabled me to write initial memos of documents and codes as well as to organize codes into code categories.

The subsequent data analysis followed three major steps:

1. Coding all narrative passages that related to the core categories, such as ‘intimacy,’ ‘time,’ ‘constraints,’ and ‘communication’ (the latter was later changed to ‘intimacy’);

2. Identifying the context in which the theme was discussed, looking for similarities and differences in the patterns, using the principles of constant comparison;

3. Abductively interpreting the results based on the interview context, the interview background, as well as previous research findings and the existing theory, still employing the constant comparison method.

As for the interpretation stage of analysis, I fully share the opinion of Judy Kendall (1999) that “the hardest part of grounded theory analysis is moving beyond description and into conceptualization and theorizing” (p. 756). Creating concepts means labelling codes on a higher abstraction level. While Milliken and Schreiber (2012, p. 687) suggest having an excellent dictionary for this purpose, I found inspiration by reading the research of others and finding concepts there (such as dimensions of intimacy for Article II and time work for Article III after a suggestion by an anonymous reviewer). By searching for inspiration in external literature, I became involved in the analytic process of abduction (Reichertz, 2007; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), encouraging the creation of analysis in synthesis between data and existing theory. I did not aim to *prove* a concept or a theory but rather to see if the

¹³ Here I must admit the failure of my first attempts to code the data. Although the aim was to move to a higher abstraction level with each step of analysis, I was coding too generally from the beginning. Charmaz (2006) describes this as coding “topics” instead of “processes.” For example, instead of coding the time-work strategies for Article III, I had merely coded the time-place zones. Whereas coding topics, as Charmaz argues, is not entirely wrong, it might prevent seeing the richness of data and seeing the detailed processes that data contains. In my case, coding time-place zones was crucial as it made me realize that time work actually differs in different time-place zones.

suggested line of thought fit the data I had. In the analysis process, among such discoveries of ‘unfitting data’ were, for instance, the fourth dimension of intimacy, imagined intimacy, in Article II; and the necessary distinction of time-place zones and respective time-work strategies in Article III. As the new concepts were introduced externally, they still needed to be compared with data, and, thus, abduction was not opposing but *involving* the processes of induction and deduction. On the one hand, the use of abduction somewhat departed from the original principles of GT where no previous reading and theory is to be used in data analysis and theory building. On the other hand, the later development of constructivist GT by Charmaz (2006) encourages abductive processes.

The final stage of analysis was writing and rewriting the early drafts of articles (Charmaz, 2006, p. 154). Moreover, writing is more than mere reporting and it also includes constant comparison, which entails returning to data and previous research (Charmaz, 2006; Reichertz, 2007). In creating an explanation for the analysed data, one should be careful to avoid “forcing” data to fit the framework. This may happen even in the writing process when a wrong way of presenting data is chosen. For instance, in Article III I chose to illustrate all time-place zones in LDRs and to describe how time work was employed in each of these time-place zones. Trying to fill in each of the time-place zones with an example of timework gave the impression to external reviewers that data had been forced. Instead, I shifted the analysis, putting more focus on how long-distance partners execute time work in relation to each of these different objective time-place zones. In this way, the central category shifted to time work and the data analysis was clearer and more precisely representing the data.

5.5. Validity and Credibility

The concern with validity and credibility originate in positivism. Positivists in sociology tried to position social sciences among the natural sciences and use similar scientific methods in understanding society (Maxwell, 2013, pp. 122-124). A qualitative research design that follows the tradition of interpretative sociology cannot be compared with the “objective reality out there” and thus cannot meet the same validity and credibility criteria. However, in qualitative as well as quantitative research, one must pursue neutrality. Neutrality, here, does not mean detachment; it means that one should not try to prove a pre-given model or perspective but should remain open to data and open to new discoveries. Thus, I have tried to observe empathic neutrality (Patton, 2002, p. 53) where the researcher tries to be empathic to her research participants but remains neutral in judgments and evaluations of the research material.

A qualitative research design has its own validity threats or, to paraphrase Maxwell (2013), “where one can get wrong” (p. 121). To avoid the validity threats I have tried to be open to data and not to ignore data that do not support my initial claims. I have looked for possible negative cases (Maxwell, 2013) and interpret what these cases mean in relation to my argumentation. For instance, for Article III I saw in the data that the interviewees reported that they manipulated their temporal experiences. However, I lacked a conceptualization for this relationship maintenance strategy until the concept of time work was suggested by an anonymous reviewer. But it was only through realizing that *waiting* is a negative case, an “unsuccessful” time work strategy that extends the experience of present-apart, that I fully realized the explanatory power of the time work concept. Likewise, when analysing data for Article IV it was clear that there was some level of idealization involved in LDR maintenance. By noticing that the interviewees were actually admitting the fact of idealization, the discovery did not fit the “normal” belief that idealization is followed by disillusionment and that idealization means a lack of awareness. This discovery allowed me to make the argument that idealization could be seen as an additional relationship maintenance strategy.

Hence, writing is still part of the analysis process (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 151-176) and thus can still be endangered by validity threats. I always had to move back and forth between my arguments and logical structures and empirical material in order to ensure that my claims were grounded in the data. Furthermore, before a submission to a journal every article was “tested” in an oral presentation at a conference and in written form in seminars or workshops. From the comments I received, I was able to evaluate whether my arguments held together and were comprehensible. Given that almost always there were people in the audience with an LDR experience, I was anxious to see what their reaction to my argumentation was. If their experience did not match that discussed in my presentation, I had to make sure that my arguments were backed up with data, or had to consider whether this discrepancy said something about my data. Also previous research served as an additional source of information to evaluate if my data replicated and confirmed previous findings. If this was not the case I had to ask myself why it could be so.

5.6. Ethical Considerations

The current research was carried out taking into consideration research ethics and the recommendations of the Swedish Ethical Review Board.

First, I asked for and received the informed consent from the interviewees before starting the interview. When contacting the potential interviewees, I briefly explained who I was and what the study would be about. At the be-

ginning of the interview, I once again introduced myself and informed the interviewees about the study. I also informed them that their participation in the study was voluntary, meaning that they could refuse to answer any questions if they wished. I mentioned that the interview data would be used for research purposes only. I also informed them that I valued their unique experiences and that I was interested in their opinions and attitudes, and that there were no right or wrong answers to my interview questions.

To ensure confidentiality and to protect the identities of the interviewees, the real names of interviewees are not revealed in presenting the results. Moreover, some information about them is generalized (e.g. the countries that we talked about) so that they could not be recognized. This is especially important considering the small population of Latvia. In two cases I met my interviewees in situations unrelated to my research, and I had to take special care not to reveal to the other people the circumstances in which we had met before.

Apart from the ethical considerations in relation to handling the data, some of the interview situations made me extra aware of the responsibility of being a researcher. Studying sensitive matters, such as intimate relationships, the researcher might realize that it is sometimes difficult to cope with the emotions that are triggered by the narrative. On the one hand, the researcher can be proud of “digging deep” and getting a colourful narrative. There was no conflict when we talked about positive emotions, such as happiness or tender feelings for the partner. On the other hand, intimate relationships are not only about happiness but also about pain. In two cases (both with male respondents) it seemed that the interview had made the interviewees think and reflect about uncomfortable topics that made them ruminative after the interview and required a transition talk (and a walk in one case). For example, one interviewee first planned to rush back to work after the interview, but afterwards it was obvious that it would not be easy for him to go back to his daily duties after having talked about his difficult past experiences. About one hour after the interview he really had to return to work, but he ended our conversation by saying: “Thanks God, it’s Friday!” Later that day, he also phoned to offer his friendship to me. This situation made me wonder whether I had appeared in his eyes as a friend who would listen to his worries and would not judge, forgetting that my role in the interview was to be a researcher. On the one hand, I consider that interview one of my most successful interviews as initially he seemed not to trust me. On the other hand, it made me think that the power positions during such an interview are somewhat unfair since the researcher gathers personal experiences and does not continue this somewhat therapeutic practice afterwards. Exactly here I, as a researcher, find a conflict: where I come into the interviewees’ lives, ask them personal questions, ask them to remember sometimes painful memories they have maybe tried to forget, and then – leave.

In one case a female interviewee confessed to me that she was happy to talk to me, as it was a relieving and therapeutic experience for her to talk to somebody. However, while the interview may be a therapeutic experience to some interviewees, in a few cases it was emotionally challenging for me as an individual. I sometimes felt unprofessional because I did not know how to react to the emotions of the interviewees. Some stories were full of optimism about the planned shared future. Some were full of sadness about missed opportunities or realisation of impossible barriers between the partners. Sometimes we laughed together, sometimes we were close to crying and sometimes we did cry. Sometimes I did not dare to ask too direct questions, and I let the person talk and tell the story.

However, in doing qualitative data analysis one should be cautious when interpreting the data, especially if one feels empathy with the study participants. Also, any qualitative study begins from the perspective of the researcher, who is challenged to move beyond his or her understandings about the matter under scrutiny (Milliken & Schreiber, 2012, p. 687). Thus, I myself, being a Latvian with an LDR experience, might not be a completely objective observer and possibly cause problems by that mere fact.

Robert Merton (1972), in his *Insiders and Outsiders: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge*, discussed the epistemology of insiders and outsiders (members and non-members of the group of interest) in research. The problem with insiderism or having personal experience related to a research topic is the risk of subjectivity in data interpretation (cf. Blumer, 1959, p. 35). The outsider doctrine, thus, suggests that only a non-member of a group can reach the knowledge about the studied phenomenon because she is unprejudiced by the group's values and understandings. An outsider questions things, while an insider would tend to take them for granted.

However, I would argue that being an insider might give the advantage of having *primary* rights to knowledge rather than *monopoly* rights. Furthermore, I am aware that, although I have had somewhat similar experiences as my interviewees, we did not share all aspects of that experience. For instance, a turning point in realizing the diversity of experiences of a similar relationship arrangement came for me when I interviewed the older participants of the study. Those interviews made me personally realize how privileged I had been in managing my own LDRs. From an insider/outsider perspective, and considering their value systems and their struggles and life choices, I realized that I was a complete outsider. This realization found its entry in Article I. However, I also felt I was some kind of insider; I could relate their experiences to those around me, my own family's and my parents' generation. This mix of being an insider and an outsider at the same time made some of the interviews emotionally difficult for me. As a qualitative researcher I doubt that formal neutrality or detachment in the interviewing process is fruitful since one of the aims of a qualitative research design is to understand the actor's point of view, which means imagining how it is to

be in the interviewee's shoes, through empathy and role-taking (cf. Patton, 2002; and symbolic interactionism).

5.7. Limitations of the Study

Although this thesis brings new knowledge to the field of sociology of intimate lives, and studies of LDRs in particular, it still has limitations that need to be taken into consideration.

I acknowledge the female domination in the sample and thus the results may be somewhat gender-biased and may have a female point of view. However, from the current data I could not see major gender differences in the relationship strategies, apart from the study reported in Article I. Furthermore, the conceptualization of relationship maintenance strategies discussed here is rather general. Yet on an individual level they may be more gendered as regards how exactly relationship work is employed or intimacy is practiced.

One of the possible limitations of the study is the lack of temporal dimension in the analysis and data collection: although the individuals interviewed had various relationship statuses with their long-distance partners, the fieldwork was done at one point in time only. Thus, the change in relationships cannot be analysed directly but relies on the interviewees' reflections about changes. An individual defines and interprets the past and imagines the future depending on the present situation (Mead, 1932/2002; Article III). That present situation may change when new present has arrived (Mead, 1932/2002). By interviewing an individual only once, we get a snapshot of his or her experience and evaluation of that experience at that particular point in time. Although a longitudinal research design would have provided the possibility to show more complexity in how individuals define their relationship and how they see their relationship maintenance, this process of defining is an ongoing and emerging one. Hence any longitudinal study would also be limited to the timeframe in which it was conducted.

Another limitation is self-selection bias. That means I heard accounts only from those individuals who were actually willing to tell me about their LDR experiences and relationship maintenance strategies. It may be that I have analysed somewhat "successful" long-distance relationships where the individuals considered themselves to be in a relationship, lacking interviews with individuals for whom the long-distance arrangement did not work out.

6. Summary and Discussion

The central aim of the thesis was to understand how long-distance partners from Latvia maintain their intimate relationships over geographical distance. This is investigated in four studies set out in four articles. Article I sets the contextual background in which the LDRs are maintained in Latvia and examines the normative clashes experienced by long-distance partners that complicate LDR maintenance. The other three studies analyse what relationship-maintaining strategies long-distance partners use to keep the levels of relationship quality and satisfaction high enough for the relationship to be “worth” continuing over geographical distance (see Bauman, 2003; Giddens, 1992). Article II concerns practices of intimacy over geographical distance. Article III deals with the micromanagement of experiences of the time the partners spend together and the time they spend geographically apart. Finally, Article IV examines the aspect of idealization in LDRs. Before I draw conclusions, I will briefly summarize the four articles.

6.1. Summary of Articles

Article I

Do I Qualify for a Love Relationship? Social Norms and Long-Distance Relationships in Post-Soviet Latvia

Article I analyses complications in relationship maintenance experienced by long-distance partners in Latvia. To conceptualize the ‘complications’ faced by long-distance partners the article draws on Parsons and Shils’ (1962) concept of value orientations which refers to culturally imposed norms that require actors to favour either their own private interests or collective interests. The value orientations are then linked with Inglehart and Welzel’s (2010) dimensions of value transitions that discuss a cultural/normative tendency to follow authority or to trust one’s own autonomy and independence. As the analysis shows, the norms complicating LDRs in Latvia are generation-specific, i.e. they differ between the generation that was raised in the Soviet Union and the generation that was raised after the collapse of the Union. The norms were also found to be gender-specific. Due to these social norms, long-distance partners may not only have to continue the long-

distance arrangements even if they would prefer to be geographically close or cohabiting, but they also may disqualify themselves from the relationship they are engaged in. In other words, due to their internalized social norms individuals may find it impossible to continue the relationship. The older interviewees who were born and raised in the Soviet period internalize norms that restrict their own agency and autonomy in favour of others. For example, they take care of elderly relatives, materially provide for the female partner, express ageism or demonstrate passivity in and avoidance of their expression of emotion. When faced with a dilemma between maintaining their own romantic relationship versus following one or more overlapping norms that require favouring the other collectives, older long-distance partners tend to give priority to collective interests, which consequently might disqualify them from a romantic relationship. The younger respondents who grew up in Latvia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, on the other hand, have internalised autonomy, self-development and self-expression as a norm. While the value orientation of self-orientation can be compatible with an LDR arrangement, the younger respondents tend to experience uneasiness about combining the norm of autonomy and self-development with being in a relationship, especially if one or both partners wish to switch to a cohabiting relationship (cf. Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995).

Article II

Imagining the Absent Partner. Intimacy and Imagination in Long-Distance Relationships

The study in Article II analyses how intimacy is created and maintained in LDRs while the partners are geographically apart. For this purpose, the study takes the stance of Sigman (1991) who argues that some social relationships can be defined as continuous if they are “stretched” beyond face-to-face meetings. The article derives from Jamieson’s (2011, p. 1) concept of “practices of intimacy.” Thus, the central question of this study is: What practices do long-distance partners employ for creating and maintaining intimacy when they are geographically separated? The article argues that it is imagination that enables the relationship to be continuous beyond face-to-face meetings and intimacy to be experienced without co-presence. Intimacy in LDRs proved to be multidimensional. The practices of intimacy that can be sensual, routinized, emotional and imaginative enable four dimensions of intimacy: embodied, daily, emotional and imagined intimacy. The data showed that intimacy practices trigger imagination, and it is through imagination that all dimensions of intimacy become available for partners who are not co-present. For instance, the bodies may not be co-present but the bodily experiences become available on an imaginative and sensual level with the use of seeing, hearing as well as touching, tasting and smelling. Emotional intimacy seems to be even easier to practice over distance than when the

partners are co-present, which suggests that geographical distance enables the gradual dismantling of emotional barriers and emotional distance that may be present in a face-to-face interaction. Daily intimacy becomes available through routinized and instant communication in which the everyday habits are revealed, allowing the spatio-temporal setting of the partner to be imagined. The fourth dimension of intimacy discovered and suggested in this article - imagined intimacy - is triggered by individual practices in which the communication is internal, i.e. in one's own mind. Imagined intimacy as an intimacy practice illustrates how the long-distance partner has become a part of the other partner's self. Hence, the findings of this study suggest that more attention should be paid to imaginative in addition to practice-like aspects of understanding intimacy.

Article III

When Less is More: On Time Work in Long-Distance Relationships

The study in Article III aims to examine how long-distance partners attribute meaning to and deal with the time they spend together and the time they spend apart. The theoretical point of departure is the notion of temporality, as developed by Mead, which is combined with Flaherty's concept of "time work" that refers to the actor's attempts to manipulate her temporal experiences. This study suggests that time work differs among what is here conceptualized as different time-place zones, where the time flow is combined with the dimension of place; that is, time work varies depending on whether the partners are together face-to-face or not. Consequently, ten time-place zones were developed: previous past-apart, previous past-together, past-together, past-apart, present-together, present-apart, future-together, future-apart, subsequent future-together and subsequent present-apart. These concepts are necessary because the type of time work and its intentionality differ depending on the time-place zone. A time-work perspective implies that individuals not only perceive time as something that is simply passing by, but that they also actively live in time, engage with time and manipulate their temporal experiences. The time-work strategies identified in this study were re-evaluating the past, deadlining, preparing for the future-together, creating an event and focusing on the here and now during the present-together, focusing on the subsequent future-together, segmenting between present-together and present-apart, as well as spending the present-apart together by using modern communication technology. Time work in LDRs means dealing with the spatiotemporal borders of the time-place zones and time flow; it is about creating these borders in order to mobilize the most appropriate time-work strategy. Time work is also about moving the spatio-temporal borders in one's mind either closer to or further away from the present in order to shrink or extend the temporal experiences, or even to blur the borders when spending the present-apart together.

Article IV

I Know that I Don't Know. Bi-Directional Idealization in Long-Distance Relationships

The study in Article IV examines the aspect of idealization in LDRs. Idealization is not seen here as merely externally constructed on a structural level and, thus, as something that reduces one's agency (see e.g. Illouz, 2007, 2014). The article analyses the micro-context of idealization created by the long-distance partners and argues that idealization is both created by the long-distance partners and a choice that makes the relationship continuous over time and geographical distance. Hence, the study sees idealization as functional in relationship maintenance. The interview data showed that idealization can be used as a relationship maintenance strategy and that the idealization is bi-directional, meaning that one partner makes herself look better in the eyes of the other and also chooses to idealize the other partner. Two turning points in the relationship development were identified that were critical to the process of idealization: the first offline meeting for those couples who met online, and the transition from close to apart, or the first time the partners geographically parted. In the analysis of idealization in LDRs, the study draws on the concept of impression management devised by Goffman (1959) and the awareness contexts suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1961) that illustrate situations in which interactants either are or are not aware of each other's true identities or true selves. The impression that is left after face-to-face meetings where impression management takes place is generally very positive and outweighs the experienced inconvenience of having the relationship over geographical distance. Mediated communication that fills in the gaps between the face-to-face meetings is also in general positive and intimate (see in Article II). It is the intense and open mediated communication, together with the time spent together in a positive atmosphere, that enables an impression of moving towards an open awareness context (Glaser & Strauss, 1961) and that facilitates the idealization process. In addition, the lack of everyday routine that was mentioned by all interviewees as the main advantage of LDRs also contributes to both the idealization and the maintenance of the long-distance relationship.

6.2. Discussion

Anthony Giddens (1990, pp. 16-21) argues that one of the characteristics of modernity is the separation of place and space. Place, according to Giddens (1990) is the physical locality that used to be linked with physical presence. Space, on the other hand, is a wider concept than place: space is not linked with physical presence and is no longer limited by the boundaries set by the

place in which one moves. Space is shaped by “absent” others that are “locationally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction” (Giddens, 1990, p. 18). Yet, despite geographical mobility and the reduced time required to travel from one place to the other, technology is not advanced enough to allow persons to physically be in two places simultaneously. Neither has the technology enabled people to reach all geographical distances in a short enough time for long-distance partners to meet every day. In order to overcome distance, one needs either resources or time, or both. Some forms of intimacy, especially bodily intimacy, used to be (and still are) practiced in designated physical areas, such as the home or remote places. When the intimate partners are separated by geographical distance, intimacy may be created in mediated space. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2014, p. 25) argue, “[d]istant love, then, means travelling in one’s mind to faraway places while sitting at home in one’s living room.” Likewise, this thesis argues for the imagined space that long-distance partners create to maintain their relationship while being in two different places.

The summary of findings from Articles II – IV that concern relationship maintenance strategies can be found in Table 2. The unifying aspect of all three studies is the critical role of imagination in relationship maintenance. What matters in relationship maintenance is the relationship and the partner a person *imagines* to have, and not who and what he or she really is. Hence, the concept of imagination is not used in a negative sense where imagination makes the relationship less “real.” On the contrary, these studies have confirmed the necessity of putting emphasis on imaginative aspects of relationships – memories of the past, how the present is seen and the future is hoped for and imagined – in understanding relationship maintenance. It has been shown and argued that imagination is a strong tool for helping relationships to continue in the mind even if they are contested by distance and/or time. Thus, in addition to seeing relationships in terms of family practices (Morgan, 1996, 2011), displaying families (Finch, 2007) and intimacy practices (Jamieson, 2011), this thesis suggests seeing relationships as they are imagined. This thesis also proposes considering how relationship work is employed in relation to these relationships that are in people’s minds.

Table 2. *Relationship maintenance strategies in LDRs*

Sets of relationship maintenance strategies	Relationship maintenance strategies	Examples of strategies on a practical level	
Creating intimacy through imagination and mediated communication	Creating sensual/ embodied intimacy	Hearing (e.g., the voice on the phone) Seeing (e.g., the partner via a webcam) Smell (e.g., the perfume of the partner) Taste (e.g., edible items from a parcel) Touch (e.g., gifts, postcards, etc.)	
	Creating daily intimacy	Shared and mediated everyday life through frequent online communication	
	Creating emotional intimacy	Sincere mediated communication Intense mediated communication	
	Creating imagined (individual) intimacy	Individual intimacy practices (e.g., writing a diary about the LDR)	
	Time-work strategies	Time work during the present-apart	Re-evaluation of the past-together Deadlining Anticipation of and preparation for the future-together Focusing on the subsequent future-together Spending the present-apart together
Time work during the present-together		Creating an event from a face-to-face meeting Focusing on the <i>here and now</i>	
Time work during present-together and present-apart		Segmenting between the time-together and the time-apart	
Bidirectional idealization		'I idealize myself in your eyes'	Impression management during present-together. Best behaviour Impression management during present-apart
		'I idealize you in my own eyes. I know that I don't know'	Focus on the positive Taking the relationship risks

My findings are in line and have added to the discussion started by Smart (2007) who includes subjective aspects, such as imagination and memory, to

describe what a relationship is. Furthermore, I have been leaning towards the scholarly discussion illustrated in Section 4.2. *Sociology of Intimate Lives* which suggests that instead of, or at least in addition to, the de-institutionalization, individualization (Bauman, 2003; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002) and discontinuity of family institution (Giddens, 1990, 1992) we can see many traces of how intimate relationships continue being important and maintained in an environment in which they may seem to be of secondary importance. Moreover, following the tradition of symbolic interactionism where the structure and the actor's agency are seen to be interdependent, I do not entirely disregard the individualization and deinstitutionalization thesis (see Article I).

The importance of imagination has been analysed here on an individual level, a level that helps in understanding the interaction of the individual with his or her long-distance partner. Article II showed how imagination is triggered by mediated communication. Imagination, then, enables four dimensions of intimacy to be practised: embodied, emotional, daily and imagined. Some material exchange items that communicate attachment to the partner are also experienced through the senses: by touching, smelling, tasting, hearing and seeing. This shows that "emotions in general and romantic love in particular are grounded in the body" (Illouz, 2007, p. 75). These findings suggest the importance of sensory perception in imagining the other person, even when he or she is physically absent. The role of imagination as being self-sustaining can help in explaining how LDRs in which partners spend a considerable time apart have similar or even higher rates of relationship satisfaction than geographically close partners (Jiang & Hanock, 2013; Guldner & Swensen, 1995; van Horn et al., 1997). The practice of daily intimacy through routinized and mediated everyday communication enables the long-distance partners to imagine each other's daily life. This allows them to mentally be part of that life and to act accordingly (e.g., by being ready for a Skype talk when the partner usually comes home from work).

In addition to intimacy practices that are reciprocal, the study also showed how the image of the long-distance partner is recreated through individual intimacy practices. The self is constructed in symbolic interaction with significant others (Mead, 1967), including intimate partners. The individual intimacy practices help us understand how intimate partners have become part of one's self. This process is more obvious when the significant other is away and it therefore shows the usefulness of studying LDRs in order to possibly extend this knowledge to other relationship arrangements.¹⁴

¹⁴ Compare, for instance, Charmaz and Milligan (2006) and their argument for the part of a self that is lost with the death of a significant other, or Jakoby and Reiser (2014) who illustrate how grieving survivors continue communicating with the deceased ones in virtual cemeteries online.

Article III adds to the argument for the necessity of an awareness of imaginative aspects of relationships. Here, it was also analysed how long-distance partners manipulate their experiences of the time they are together and the time they are geographically apart. Hochschild (1996) suggests seeing time as a *shelter for relationships* because relationship maintenance requires time, especially in the capitalist context where time is fetishized as it is always lacking. “The metaphor of time as a shelter for a relationship defetishizes time. It invites us to see time as a material used to shelter or destroy relationships. It also reveals to us how time fetish erodes relationships” (Hochschild, 1996, p. 11). Her later book *Time Bind* (1997b) shows how time erodes relationships, namely how dual-career couples decide to invest their time in their careers, which consequently “steals” time from their families. However, the time-work strategies used by the long-distance partners of this study show that time can be managed in such a way that less (time together) can mean more than the mere quantity of it. The bottom line of the time-work strategies found in Article III is that it is important to enjoy and focus on the time the long-distance partners have together: when the meeting is actually taking place (during the present-together), as well as when it is already over and kept in memory (as past-together) and when it is imagined (as future-together). These time-work strategies enable long-distance partners to make the time apart less important than the time together, despite the fact that quantitatively time apart outweighs time together, once again illustrating the critical role of the image that the long-distance partners have in their mind about their relationship.

The findings from Articles II and III together with those of Article IV where the aspect of idealization was examined can serve as an explanation of why long-distance partners tend to have higher levels of idealization than geographically close partners (Stafford, 2005; Stafford & Merolla, 2007; Stafford & Reske, 1990). Article III shows that time together is *valued* higher, it is *remembered* as positive and it is *created* to yield positive emotions. Article IV shows that the time together is also *staged* to be positive by means of impression management (Goffman, 1959) and by leaving the negative aspects aside. Impression management is also performed during the time apart. In addition, the study shows that this idealization is bidirectional: the long distance partners not only practice impression management in order to create a better impression of themselves in the eyes of the partner, but they also choose to focus on positive aspects and idealize the partner in their own eyes. Thus, the partners follow the image they have constructed of each other even if this image is challenged by mismatching behaviour or rumours.

The overall findings confirm previous arguments that an intimate relationship is not something that is externally defined but is what the individuals involved in that relationship *make* out of it (Jamieson, 2011; Morgan, 1996, 2004, 2011). The findings prove the importance of what is called practices of intimacy by Jamieson (2011) or *relationship work*. The studies also

show that a relationship is what individuals involved in it *think* or *imagine* of it, even if the opinions and practices between the partners in the same intimate relationship may differ.

This argumentation adds to the methodological and conceptual discussion regarding what we can call an intimate relationship today (among others see: Gabb & Silva, 2011; Jamieson, 1998, 2011; Levin, 2004; Morgan, 1996; 2011). I have suggested that instead of having a top-down approach applying existing labels to relationship arrangements, family scholars should be open to the actual practices of intimacy that people employ, even if they are not morally accepted, such as infidelity. That is not to say that such terms as family, marriage or relationships are entirely empty concepts, but it is to say that individuals define the environment and objects around them from their own experiences and understanding, and can in their everyday lives practice relationships that differ from those that have been defined on discursive levels. Furthermore, the sample of this study, which also included individuals who continued their LDRs purely in their imagination even though they do not do so in an observable practice already for years, calls for further research and attention to relationships that people have in their minds, memories, hopes and future perspectives. Moreover, long-distance relationships have proved to be an interesting phenomenon to study as it falls in between the ‘extremes’ of relationships, that is cohabitation on the one side, and the situation of two individuals who have developed attachment but have never met each other (e.g., online dating), on the other side. Thus, it is a case where the real world and the imagined world intersect.

This thesis also adds new knowledge on how intimate relationships are practiced in Latvia, thus, drawing attention to Eastern Europe as an interesting region in which to study intimate lives. Article I, where the normative conflicts experienced by LDR partners in the post-Soviet context were illustrated, reveals that relationship work requires resources. Among those resources are material and time resources. Social inequalities that can be extreme in a country with high income inequality such as Latvia (Eurostat, 2011) and different value systems that result from having lived in different regimes or social worlds (Shibutani, 1955) extend also to interpersonal and couple relationships. Article I, thus, sets a contextual background in which LDRs are maintained, illustrating differences in experienced socioeconomic changes in which some individuals are granted geographical freedoms while the freedom of others is limited even more when compared to those who seem not to have any restrictions in their decision making and intimacy practices. The perception of distance for the younger age groups who have not settled, who are socialized with a globalization perspective, whose friends and acquaintances already have an experience of migration and who have foreign partners or friends with foreign partners abroad, is different from those whose mobility is limited to an inter-town bus schedule. Also, for those with easy access to the global World Wide Web, for people who can

easily communicate and find friends online from overseas, geographical borders seem virtual rather than real. However, all borders and distances become not only real but also very restrictive when one cannot afford to cross them. My sample consisted of individuals for whom long-distance, here defined as “not being able to meet every day,” was as little as 45 km within the borders of Latvia which is rather small compared to other countries. Lower income as well as not having the experience of going abroad makes the perception of geographical mobility limited. Moreover, if one is dependent on the asymmetric labour market, this perception of distance remains permanent and so does the arrangement of a long-distance relationship. Thus, the examination of LDRs is an excellent way to observe the (dis)ability of people to cross the borders of their lived spaces if they wish so. If one is disqualified from a relationship that involves a “real” interaction (face-to-face or virtual), a relationship that is continued in one’s mind remains the only possible type of relationship.

6.3. Areas for Further Research

Given that the long-distance relationships is an understudied topic in the sociology of intimate lives and in sociology in general, and that this thesis is in no way an exhaustive study of long-distance relationships, there is much room for further research in addition to the suggestions given in Articles I-IV.

My first suggestion is to pay more sociological attention to LDRs. The analysis of contemporary love relationships for analysing modernity has already been suggested (Illouz, 2012). In addition to the analysis of modernity and how it has “arrived” in different social contexts,¹⁵ studying LDRs can offer new knowledge about space and mobility through the lens of contemporary intimacy, as well as about intimacy through the lens of space and mobility.

As there is very little knowledge available on the prevalence of non-cohabiting relationships in society, it would be fruitful to include living apart together relationships and long-distance relationships separately in future inquiries about an individual’s relationship status, in order to obtain quantifiable and representative findings of the numbers of LDRs. In addition, it would be interesting to see what cities and countries are “connected” through personal couple relationships. While we have statistics of formal relationship unions of cross-national couples and some notion of the trajectories of labour migrants, there is little understanding of short-term mobility when partners

¹⁵ Hirsch (2007, p. 104) argues that modernity may arrive without modernization, giving the example of Mexico where the dependence on strong kinship and extended family structures can hinder “coming out” despite the individualisation tendencies in society.

shuttle from/to their time-together to/from their time-apart time-space trajectories. Findings from such a quantitative and representative study might reveal a fascinating web of cross-border couples that not necessarily are cross-national ones.

Furthermore, there is little knowledge about how national policies and legislation influence the formation and maintenance of LDRs. Although some research has been conducted on the legal expectations of LAT couples (Lyssens-Danneboom et al., 2013), more information is necessary to discover if non-cohabiting and long-distance partners are in need of any special legal status or policy measures. For instance, Stuck and Ware (2005), in their autobiographical narrative, hinted that long-distance relationships can entail extra cost and inconvenience on a very practical level due to extra insurance that needs to be applied for, or due to difficulties with doctoral appointments when the registered place of residence differs from the actual residence. Similar issues might be related to taxes and social benefits that often depend on one's place of official residence and not on one's actual place of living.

From a power-balance perspective, further research is needed to understand how long-distance couples make decisions about relocation, and how far we can talk about gender equality in their decision making. Relocation can, of course, concern both directions: either it is about transiting from a long-distance to cohabiting relationship, or from a cohabiting relationship to a long-distance relationship. Such research could reveal the power-balance within the couple. It would contribute to the discussion of whose career, development or extended family duties matters more and whether LDRs can be seen as a manifestation of gender equality. Very likely, the latter is a more complex question reflecting individual and structural influencing aspects. On a structural level, research on decision-making about relocation could also show hierarchies of countries when the decision-making about the country to live in is made. This is especially interesting in relation to Latvia, an emigration country, which has recently passed a remigration act to assist émigrés from Latvia who are considering returning to Latvia.

Last but not least, the recent and rapid social, economic and political changes in Eastern Europe make this region an interesting study area as regards the consequences the new modernity has had in the sphere of intimate lives. Hence, it may be interesting to see how the socioeconomic inequalities of people, differences in institutionalized care for elders and the sick, as well as other possible structural aspects may be affecting intimacy practices in Eastern Europe.

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