

Gender and the Construction of Intimacy among Committed Couples with Children

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This study began with curiosity regarding how long-term couples with children manage their relationships in view of changing societal demands and ideals. Couples interviewed for this study described the intersection of time and intimacy as a core issue. Thus, this analysis focused on how couples construct intimacy in shared time. The diverse sample included 17 heterosexual working and professional class couples in the United States who had been committed for at least 10 years and whose oldest child was aged 6–16. Analysis identified four types of shared time experiences: gender divided, elusive, growing, and emotionally connected. Four factors influenced these types: (a) negotiated gendered differences, (b) intentionality, (c) mutual attending, and (d) dyadic friendship. The most emotionally connected couples reported that time together reinforced satisfaction and pleasure from their relationships. Results help explain different ways couples successfully negotiate changing expectations for heterosexual relationships and why some couples struggle. Findings suggest that therapists help couples intentionally develop habits of friendship and mutual attending.

Keywords: Time Together; Intimacy; Emotional Connection; Gender; Couples

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TIME TOGETHER: GENDER AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF INTIMACY AMONG COMMITTED COUPLES WITH CHILDREN

Contemporary couples face changing—and often conflicting—expectations regarding what it means to live and love together (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007; Coontz, 2005; Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 2009). Despite such pressures, desires for deeper intimacy and mutually satisfying exchanges are increasing (Fishbane, 2011; Knudson-Martin, 2013). Consequently, processes related to intimacy such as increased self-disclosure, understanding, and emotional sharing remain common clinical goals (Carter & Carter, 2010; Greenman & Johnson, 2013; Wile, 2013).

In this qualitative grounded theory study, we set out to discover how relatively stable couples who have also been dealing with parental and other time demands for an extended period manage the intimate aspects of their relationships. Our study participants repeatedly named “time together” as fundamental to their experiences of intimacy and important

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to the stability of their relationships. Their experience was similar to Fraenkel's (2011) conclusion that "it's about time" (p. 238). As a result, in this analysis we focus on understanding the factors that distinguish how couples committed over the long-term manage the intersection of time and intimacy.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF TIME TOGETHER

From a social constructionist perspective, time and intimacy are shared co-created experiences (Daly, 1996; Weingarten, 1991). Couples construct intimacy in the context of daily temporal interactions (Sanderson & Evans, 2001). As they respond to each other, they interpret and give meaning to their interactions. Several factors influence their actions: (1) consideration of past and anticipated events, (2) concurrent demands, (3) how each partner desires to present to the other (Daly & Beaton, 2005). Consequently, "activity and plans for activity are grounded in a shared time consciousness" (Daly, 1996, p. 45).

Evaluations of time together are influenced by sociocultural ideas about when and where couples should spend time together, notions about who is responsible for planning time, and which partner should accommodate or organize around the other (Daly & Beaton, 2005). Expectations may change at significant junctures such as the arrival and departure of children, illness or disability, or change in economic status. Thus, a couple's construction of intimacy in shared time is an emergent experience influenced by situational and contextual factors.

Time in Families

When it comes to time, family members often find themselves "driven by forces outside their control" (Hochschild, 1997, p. 46). Parents are particularly squeezed for time, with women reporting the most acute time dilemmas (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004). How time is managed, allocated, and experienced is thus a highly contested arena in contemporary family life (Perry-Jenkins, Newkirk, & Ghunney, 2013). Who does what has symbolic meaning over and above instrumental task management (Davis & Greenstein, 2013). Choices communicate each partner's worth and what is important and involve questions about how partners influence each other.

Among heterosexuals, influence processes are often highly gendered, creating a power imbalance in who attends to whom and who looks out for the relationship (Knudson-Martin, 2013). Keeping track of emotions remains feminized and less valued (Loscocco & Walzer, 2013). Across SES, racial, and ethnic groups, women perform more family and emotion work than men (Perry-Jenkins et al., 2013). Thus, women and men may approach shared time from different value and power positions (Tuttle, Knudson-Martin, & Kim, 2012).

Shared Time and Intimacy

Cultural models for intimacy vary considerably (Silverstein, Bass, Tuttle, Knudson-Martin, & Huenergardt, 2006; Tuttle et al., 2012). It is likely that not all happy couples seek or attain the same levels of togetherness or intimacy (e.g., Rauer & Volling, 2013). Increased shared time may be associated with higher marital satisfaction and decreased likelihood of marital conflict (Amato et al., 2007; Schneider & Waite, 2005). Spouse's evaluation of shared time is also a significant predictor of marital stability and risk of divorce (Gager & Sanchez, 2003). Fraenkel (2001, 2011) theorizes that shared time experiences are central to relationship satisfaction and encourages couples to construct their own "rhythms of intimacy" (p. 35).

It is thus useful to study how couples who have demonstrated commitment over the long-term approach shared time. In doing so, we seek to capture the subjective and relational aspects of time. In contrast to traditional time-use studies that focus attention on time as a linear, temporal construct recorded in measurable units (Everingham, 2002), our goal was to develop grounded theory that explains how intimate times are constructed among the working and professional class couples in this study and the gendered processes that shape their experience of shared time.

METHOD

This study is part of the Contemporary Couples Study (CCS) at Loma Linda University in Southern California. The CCS is an ongoing grounded theory study of how intimate partners in a variety of contexts make decisions, handle work and family tasks, communicate, love, and support each other (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 2009). In grounded theory, analysis theory evolves from data without reliance on hypotheses or a priori assumptions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). It is a flexible open-ended, process-oriented approach that allows for data to be continually revised and reformulated and can generate new directions at any point in the study (Charmaz, 2006).

Data Collection

In grounded theory analysis, the sample is selected based on the participants' ability to provide theoretically relevant information (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The sample consisted of 17 heterosexual working and professional class couples who had been married for an average of 14 years, ranging 9 through 23 years, and whose oldest children were aged 6–16. In all but one case, at least one partner held a college degree. In most, both partners work outside the home; however, the sample includes both stay-at-home mothers and fathers. Though most of the sample held professional jobs, several were students and in one case both were unemployed. The average age of male participants was 42; for females it was 39. The sample was ethnically and culturally diverse, consisting of seven Caucasian, five African American, four interracial (Caucasian/Asian, Hispanic/Asian/Black/Caucasian) couples, and one Filipino couple. Ten couples had two children; four couples had one child; and three had three children.

Participants were originally contacted by interviewers who explained that the Contemporary Couples Study is an ongoing investigation interested in the kinds of issues couples face maintaining a family and love relationship over time. Partners had to agree to be interviewed together as this would allow interviewers to observe how they responded to each other and created meaning together. The interviewers were trained doctoral students in the Marriage and Family Therapy Program at Loma Linda University.

Interviews

Face to face interviews were conducted in the homes of participants or a site preferred by them. Before proceeding with the interview, the interviewer reiterated the purpose of the study and explained the right of participants to withdraw or refuse to answer any questions at any point. Open-ended questions allowed interviewers to gear the inquiry toward discussion of relevant themes. Examples include, "How is the emotional work done in your relationship?" "How much time do you spend apart and together?" "How do you decide? Who? When? Doing What? Why?" "How well is this balance working for each?" "How has this changed over time?" "How is your experience influenced by gender?" "How are physical affection and sexual closeness part of your relationship?" "Has it changed over time?" Interviews were taped and transcribed.

Data Analysis

In grounded theory, analysis begins during the initial data gathering and continues throughout the process (Charmaz, 2006). Analysis of interview transcripts began with line-by-line open coding in which we took care to remain very close to the words and experience of the participants. We were also guided by our initial focus on identifying relational processes shaping couples' experiences as they navigated family life, intimacy, and relational stability issues. We found that couples repeatedly used several metaphors to emphasize the importance they placed on time together. These included, "time together," "Mom and Dad time," "quality time," "our time," "time for us," and "time to be intimate," among others. Consistent with grounded theory methods, we allowed these emerging ideas to determine the direction of the research.

Our interest in gender led us to ask how male/female differences and similarities may shape their descriptions of intimate times and how they address notions of entitlement to and control over shared time. We wondered what meanings couples gave to their experiences. Three hundred and thirty-five initial line-by-line codes resulted from this process. As the data were reviewed, the first author began developing analytic memos centered on these questions as well as journal entries to personally reflect on the process. The first and second authors met regularly with other members of the CCS research team to examine and challenge the emerging codes and to formulate hypotheses regarding the experience of "time together" for participants.

We used axial coding to group the open codes into larger conceptual themes or categories and to look for dimensions and variations within them. The original open codes were transformed into theoretical concepts such as "togetherness," "emotional safety," "mutual attending," "friendship," and "intentionality." Finally, we examined how these categories related to each other. As categories were conceptually refined and developed into a theory in which four factors explain variations in couples' experiences of time together, it was necessary to return to the data for constant comparison of differences and similarities between and among couples. It was also interesting to note that the relational processes identified in this analysis transcended cultural, racial, and ethnic differences among the participants. Couples of various ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds were found in each type of togetherness.

RESULTS

Four factors seemed to have influenced the nature and frequency of couples' shared time experiences: (a) negotiating gendered differences, (b) intentionally integrating shared time in their schedules, (c) mutually attending to each other, and (d) dyadic friendship. The analysis that follows illustrates a synergistic interaction between these factors and an expanded sense of intimacy.

Gender Divided Time

Three (3) couples made little or no reference to shared time. Gender stereotypes and the power of the male to define and limit time together helped to keep these partners apart. As a result, intentionality about shared time, mutual attending, and dyadic friendship are virtually absent, with other temporal constraints taking priority.

Tom Typically she's out of the house by 6:45 am. . . . I am out by 7:30/7:45 and then I'm off work at 4:30 but rarely, during the week am I home before 8 because of circus, weekends are for me anyway, a decompression time . . . we're typically apart. . . .

- Linda** A lot
- Tom** That's 13–14 hours a day Monday through Thursday.
- Linda** But then when you come home, it's not like we spend a lot of time together, you know, he'll eat, and sometimes we'll sit and watch a show together. . . . I go to bed because I'm tired, and he's usually up on Facebook or something.

Tom, in particular, described several activities in addition to his job as a court advocate that occupy his attention, (volunteering after work, Facebook after dinner and “decompression time” on weekends), leaving little room for time together. Tom seems to take for granted that his schedule need not be altered to accommodate time with his partner. Linda appears resigned to things as they are.

Similarly, even though Obed and Whitney are unemployed and frequently in each other's presence, they cite work, family, and child rearing responsibilities as reasons for having less time together:

- Obed** You have to juggle your work; you have to juggle the family life. You have to put all the things into perspective and sometimes it can be very overwhelming.
- Whitney** Hmmmm. I think having a child was major. Yeah, because she came first in everything; I think even the relationship was no longer first.

Cudjoe and Khamisi agree their shared times are brief, sporadic episodes that are frequently restricted to a dinner date, followed by a rapid return to multiple time commitments. While Cudjoe, a photographer, views this as necessary to achieve their life goals, Khamisi, a student, feels deprived of the intimate closeness created in shared time.

- Khamisi** . . .with the little money that we have we may go somewhere and then when we come home its study, school time, work time.
- Cudjoe** But I think we are lucky because whatever we have been looking forward to is almost there. She is writing her final board exam this Friday.
- Interviewer** What do you think?
- Khamisi** Yes, it's been so, but you know my complaint has been that we don't spend time together . . . it's like you planting a tree; you have to water it, you have to nurture it. Being together that's how you nurture your relationship. You have to make an effort. Something is bound to come up that will be a big stressor in our life and you can't just say let's put a hold on our relationship. We've got to you know, spend time, put time aside for our relationship. If we get so caught up in doing this or that, going to school, letting the relationship suffer, what purpose is that if at the end of the day we have a lot of money and no happiness? So, but yea, we've been deprived a lot.

Women in this group tended to believe their male partners do not understand or are incapable of fulfilling their emotional needs. All the women in this group, though not necessarily unhappy overall in the relationship, felt their emotional needs were left unattended.

Whitney wonders if Obed is even aware that she has emotional needs.

- Whitney** I don't really know if he knows I have an emotional need. I am not really sure if he knows

Khamisi attributes her lack of emotional fulfillment to gender differences:

Khamisi I think men have a kind of emotion (*laughter*), but I think we [women] are more emotional people. I guess that's why we cry more easily and things like that. . . . So if I don't get that emotional attachment from my husband, it kills, I mean it! That's like fifty percent of the relationship if it is not there!

Linda challenges Tom to admit he has not done his share of the emotional work even after she expressed her needs to him:

Interviewer How is emotional work divided in your relationship?

Linda (*laughs*) Yeah, how is that emotional work divided?

Tom That's a fairly vague question

Linda No it's not!

Interviewer How do you notice her needs?

Tom She tells me

Interviewer How do you respond when she tells you?

Tom (*laughs*)

Linda Yeah, how do you respond?

Tom (*laughs*)

Men in this group seemed to be confused by their wives' disappointment because they see themselves successfully fulfilling stereotypical "male" attributes such as the knowledge, skill, and ability to provide for the family, fix problems, and in some cases, their willingness to help with child rearing and domestic responsibilities. Tom, who Linda has accused of not meeting her emotional needs, has his own ideas about why his wife should love him:

Tom Well, I think in a very self-centered sense, that's how I would feel a connection. Fix it. You should love me because I fixed it, or at least attempted to fix it.

Cudjoe expresses the traditional view that males are mainly responsible for providing for the family, thus implying that meeting emotional needs is not a priority for him.

Cudjoe Men are usually focusing on only one thing, so because of that my focus is to make sure the family is provided for.

Couples in the gender divided, low shared time group also tended to describe less satisfying sex. As with other intimacy dimensions, these couples were more prone to implicate temporal responsibilities as the culprits in taking away time for each other.

Whitney The physical sexual aspect of it was . . . I guess we were young, it was hot, hot, hot (*laughter*) and then we had kids.

Obed Hmm. You have so many things to do and then you don't really have that much time or you gonna be exhausted somehow because of too many things. . .

Khamisi believes Cudjoe's time with her has been limited to sexual intimacy, while her emotional needs remain unfulfilled. She experiences this as a power issue:

Khamisi Over the years I have always bothered him and told him you need to take time with me. . . . I feel so neglected you know? Recently I started studying for my boards . . . but I have been unavailable because I had to

study . . . just coming out to cook. And it has gotten to him, it eats him like I don't know. He is literally stressed out and I am thinking it's just 1 month! And yet I have been suffering for the past 8 years, you know?

Linda agrees with Tom that sexual intimacy is a significant challenge in their relationship:

Linda I would say that it's like, for us, this is the number one issue . . . and um, I always feel very discouraged about it because, I mean for all the things he said. We're not . . . I don't feel like we're compatible in that way.

Thus, the gender divided couples described minimal shared time. Women felt emotionally alone and men were not able to reorient traditional masculine expectations to meet female desires. Both these women and men also reported disappointment with their sexual intimacy. Though the women may previously have sought shared time, they seem to have given up seeking that goal.

Elusive Shared Time

Four couples spoke of shared time as an elusive goal. They understood its importance, but they described being unable to actualize plans to include it in their schedules. Instead, they cite family members' conflicting schedules, job responsibilities, child raising tasks, and domestic chores as constraints. Furthermore, couples in this group struggled to negotiate the issues emerging from the intersection of gender and time given to paid and non-paid work. As a result, the ongoing development of intimate connection desired by both was limited.

Meling is a psychiatrist who agreed to be the stay-at-home parent, while Bob, a real estate agent, supported the family. Although Bob worked out of the home and both were frequently in each other's presence, they talked about the need to include more shared time in their schedules but felt unable to achieve such a goal.

Bob It's something that you have to make time for. Before [children], the time was there. You didn't have to make time for it.

Meling Exactly. It's more difficult to make time for it. At the end of the day, we're so tired. At this juncture in our lives, it's not where we would like it to be, but it's something that we're aware of and something that we definitely want.

Bill, a dental student, and Brandy, a full-time homemaker, enjoyed time together, but felt it was not frequent enough. Brandy noted gender differences in their approach to shared time.

Brandy Yeah. I would not say, you know, Bill is as "needy" probably as I am. . . . I think we are both fairly in tune when we need that or we try . . . to sort of do something where we can, whatever, sit at dinner by ourselves and just connect sort of and do something different than just come home and have dinner and feed the kids or whatever. That probably has not been frequently enough; but I feel when we get those opportunities we enjoy sort of fulfilling those things with each other. Would you say that?

Bill Uh huh.

Tatiana is a medical student on rotation and is therefore constantly under time constraints. Her husband Igor is currently unemployed and is at home with their daughter. Both discussed the challenge this arrangement poses for their time together and how they attempted to deal with it.

Tatiana I see that and I know that, okay, I'm not being available today, tomorrow, or the rest of this week because I'm so stressed out that I can't think of anything else and I cannot relax. But then . . . I know that I've deprived him of something that I . . . my attention and of my love, so then I know that I need to do something. . . . I'll tell him let's make an appointment, a date.

Igor Yeah, we make appointments.

Tatiana And I'll . . . this is my way of making it up and catching it up.

Like Tatiana, women in this group tended to take the lead and intentionally structure shared time. Though they were often unable to translate the desire for time into action, both partners enjoyed brief glimmers of mutual attunement and friendship when they did. This was a critical difference with the gender divided group where women desired more time, while men felt unable to provide it. Nonetheless, stereotypical gendered expectations that men are less emotional than women and therefore did not need intimate connection still influenced this group's approach to shared time:

Igor Because of my low key environment and in general because I'm kind of a low stress kind of guy, I do not really need much. . .

Tatiana Nurturing

Igor . . .nurturing because it's just naturally like that for me. It has always been like that for me. On the emotional, I am pretty level.

Couples in the elusive shared time group described reduced sexual satisfaction and attributed it to time pressures.

Interviewer How is the physical affection and sexual part of your relationship going?

Melina It used to be much better before we had children, admittedly. And I think that's true for most people. Because when you have young children, you're so sleep-deprived, and I have to get up for the baby a couple times at night. That part suffers for sure.

Bob But it's fine.

Sexual satisfaction for Igor and Tatiana was significantly hampered by the same temporal job demands that restricted the amount and frequency of their time together. Both were frustrated, but felt unable to change the situation:

Tatiana We talk about it. See, I explain . . . I have to be . . . you know . . . umm, I'm not like a robot, all of a sudden you turn on and, you know . . . I just

Igor You know, she's not like a, she's not like a man . . . If she's totally wiped out from her work, you know, who wants a robot?

Growing Shared Time

Three couples described growing in their time together and experienced deeper emotional and sexual intimacy satisfaction compared to those where shared time is elusive. Though gendered attitudes and expectations regarding intimacy needs continued to impact the nature of their time together, men in this group described learning to attune to their wives and both partners were more intentional regarding time together.

Lorraine, a teacher, and Alex, an electrician, described the ongoing nature of their shared time that formed the basis of their emotional connection.

Interviewer How do you stay emotionally connected to each other?

Alex Joking around, clowning, time alone, smiling at each other. . .

Interviewer How about you Lorraine? How do you stay emotionally connected?

Lorraine Talking, I think by talking and I ask certain questions.

Significantly, both partners (not just the woman) described an intentional shift that led them to be more purposeful in attending to the needs of each other.

Lorraine I had to make the decision that I am going to try to make this work no matter how difficult it is. No matter how tired I feel. No matter how upset I am, to make the decision that I need to stay in this relationship.

Interviewer How about Alex?

Alex I made the decision to treat her like a full time job. Meaning you got to approach it . . . you got to start on time. You have got to do what you do on time. As a man you have to do what is required to do the job.

Like Lorraine and Alex, James and Thai moved beyond stereotypic gender divisions that make women responsible for relationship maintenance. Both are busy medical doctors who reported increased commitment to make more time for each other over the course of their relationship.

Interviewer How much time are you able to spend together versus apart?

Thai That's one of the things we've been working on more lately within the last couple of years, I think. And, um, we tend to, um, take an hour or two during the week, at least, what, two times a week, maybe?

James Two or three, it kind of depends.

Thai Just kind of to sit down with tea or coffee or whatever and just kind of. . .

James Talk or not talk or just do something we might want to do together or . . . kinda forget about everything else, want some coffee or tea, and we'll watch a show together, you know?

Couples in this group report growing more attuned and responsive to each other's needs over time. Consequently, sexual intimacy and satisfaction also seemed to grow as well.

Thai It's gotten better. Um, because that's what we're more open to . . . what he wants, what I want, what I don't want . . . and it's not necessarily taken as rejection, you know, "I'm just really tired." You know, and then we tend to set up dates, too, that way.

James She'll say, "I would like to, but I'm too tired. Will you come spoon with me or snuggle up to me?"

People in the growing group sometimes spoke of women and men having different needs. But men described being influenced by their female partners and learning to be responsive to her needs:

Aiden Most people don't understand quality time. Now I understand quality time.

Sasha I taught him that.

Aiden You have to learn quality time. Now that's over everything now, because a man's quality time is different from a woman's quality time.

Sasha Yes, it is.

Interviewer Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

Sasha ...his quality time could be going out, going to play games, going to the movies, going to dinner. I just want my husband in my presence. Sometimes you just want to just hug and cuddle and sit on a couch. So that's the difference.

Thus, couples in the growing group reported increasing experiences of shared togetherness that was impacted by a greater openness to each other's needs and reinforces sexual satisfaction. Alex expresses the group sentiment with a telling metaphor describing the pleasure of time together:

Alex It's like when you lick a sucker and you get in the middle of it and get a gum in there. ... Or it's like a cold glass of water at the end of 115 degrees day.

Emotionally Connected Group

The elusive and growing groups all reported that the togetherness they experience during shared time is fundamental to their emotional connection with each other—when they were able to attain it. This positive experience was the main reason that the emotionally connected, high shared time group ($n = 6$) was so intentional about creating time together. Consistent with previous findings, couples with intimacy goals tended to spend more time together (Radmacher & Azmitia, 2006).

In this regard, Tim, a manager, and Susan, a teacher, described how shared time is their opportunity to connect with each other regardless of the activity:

Interviewer How do you stay emotionally connected to each other?

Susan We run away.

Tim We go away.

Interviewer Together?

Tim Yes, together.

Susan Yes, together.

Tim We take a walk. Sometimes we walk because we need to. Sometimes we walk because it's time to walk. Sometimes we walk because one or both of us needs to get out.

Susan Sometimes we just shut the door to the bedroom.

Tim Sometimes we just shut the door to the bedroom.

For Tom, a business executive, and Beverly, a teacher, increased stress brought on by other temporal commitments such as child rearing responsibilities triggered renewed efforts to spend more time together. From this perspective, shared time was a buffer against the erosion of their emotional connection. Gender distinctions in relational needs were virtually absent. Further, both partners were equally alert to the potentially corrosive effects of parenting and other time demands on their emotional closeness and were equally committed to being proactive in creating time for each other to repair it. Such an attitude contrasts sharply with the gender divided and elusive shared time groups who feel unable to respond.

Beverly Yeah. Friday night is our big night where it's just our family and then we usually end up putting her down and saying to the kids we're going to

have our mom and dad time right now. And I think that's the biggest thing. . . . Every once in a while we'll go on an away time.

Tom Which I'm planning. We are going to get away for a long weekend.

Beverly I think when we start feeling pulled in a thousand directions then we're like, okay now we need to have some more time.

Tom But again, I think when that happens we both sense it and feel it, and then we start talking and then we come up with a plan.

Togetherness in the emotionally connected, high shared time group was rooted in friendship. Couples describe themselves as best friends, therefore love to be with each other. There was little similar sentiment in any of the other groups. For these couples, shared time was often integrated throughout daily activities. There was an eroticization of daily routines so that domestic responsibilities and emotional connection are not so separate.

Joe We are both very physical

Lauren . . . Driving in the car if even it's a finger just a little contact and it's like we're good.

Similarly, Dalisay and Benji described pleasure in sharing daily routines:

Dalisay We like each other, we love each other. We like being with each other. We pretty much share everything.

Benjie Uh huh.

Dalisay Cause even when it comes to food we decide together. We always shop together.

Rather than a difficult challenge, intentionality about time together was described as a natural outcome of emotional connection and mutual attunement.

Suchi Well . . . we talk, spend time together as a family, take vacations . . . we just love one another so it's not hard.

Jose We do . . . she's my best friend.

In contrast to women in other groups who felt their relational needs were not understood, women in this group described friendship and emotional safety with their partners:

Shontelle That's the good thing about us . . . we do talk. We've never had a problem talking. He's my best friend. . . . No one knows us better than we know each other.

Susan I have to admit I am completely fascinated by our relationship. I cannot even believe, if I had known how comfortable one person could be to live with I might not have had such a negative view of living with someone. . . . He's just good company. It's the best decision I've ever made. It's just really nice to be absolutely loved.

Getting to friendship and emotional connection was sometimes a difficult process:

Beverly I think for me it was just I was emotionally not connected with him because he was um; well . . . he was not a very safe friend for me.

Significantly, the relationship changed when Beverly experienced Tom attuning to her needs.

Beverly I love the story that essentially when I said "I'm done with this 'cause I'm freaking out here, I'm depressed, I can't go to you," he said, okay. . . . And

at that moment he cared more about me than what his needs were in the relationship and he actually said “well we’ll be apart, but uh, you know, no matter what happens I’ll always be here for you, I’ll always buy you a cup of coffee,” and that’s when the friendship really. . . . For me I’m like, if he is that great and he’s that nice, then I’ll just keep him.

Hence, being “best friends” means there is mutual enjoyment of each other, each partner is willing to attune and respond to the needs of the other. When these are consistently present in the shared encounter, shared time becomes a safe place for emotional connection that in turn creates deep intimacy.

According to Beverly, when she began to feel “safe” in her shared time with Tom, their sexual intimacy experience “skyrocketed.” Similarly, Jose, an engineer, and Suchi, a real estate agent, note that having a child did not change their enjoyment of each other:

Interviewer So how is the physical affection and sexuality part of your relationship together?

Suchi I think it’s good (*laughing*).

Jose Yeah (*laughing*).

Interviewer Has your way of expressing sexual closeness changed over time?

Suchi Well yeah . . . with our daughter, like we can’t just show affection anywhere, around the house, like before, because of our daughter.

Jose Yeah, but when we’re alone I don’t think anything has changed.

Lauren and Joe bring high intentionality to keeping their sexual intimacy alive:

Lauren Especially if you’ve been married for a while you have to keep an interest. . .

Joe Keep the job alive . . . we’ll even talk about it sometimes in the day or I’ll kiss the back of her neck.

In sum, the emotionally connected couples enjoy considerable time together. They describe their relationships in terms of a close personal friendship, “best friends,” that is characterized by strong emotional connection and mutual desire to share increasing amounts of time with each other. Gendered stereotypes are relinquished and both members of the dyad are focused on the relationship. These couples also describe more deeply intimate shared time experiences as well as greater satisfaction with sexual intimacy compared to the other groups. Further, shared time is often integrated throughout their daily schedules as couples create new ways of experiencing togetherness. In this recursive relationship, as shared time encounters increase, stronger emotional bonds are constructed that in turn enrich couples’ time together.

DISCUSSION

All the couples in this study had many demands on their time. When asked about their emotional connection processes, virtually all framed these in terms of “time together.” Thus, this analysis provides grounded evidence that many couples today use time together as their personal model of intimacy (e.g., Bennett, 2000; Sayer, 2005; Voorpostel, Van der Lippe, & Gershuny, 2009). However, couples vary strikingly in the degree to which they actually experience intimate shared time and how central it is in their lives.

The link between gender and intimate shared time was particularly pronounced and seemed to directly affect couples’ ability to attain the time together they said they desired.

Similar to the mutually engaged and mutually supportive couples in Rauer and Volling's (2013) study of happy couples, the emotionally connected, high sharing couples in this study seemed to transcend gender differences; both men and women were intentional in organizing time together and each was said to attend to the other. Like the "passionate and equal" couples in Aarseth's (2007) Norwegian study, domestic responsibilities, child rearing tasks, work commitments, and other temporal responsibilities were not allowed to erode shared time. On the contrary, the impact of such stressors triggered renewed efforts to carve out time together to buffer their effects. Though these couples reported seeking out considerable private time, shared time was also woven into the thread of their everyday lives and thus not distinct from other domestic activities.

By contrast, all of the other couples were organized by gender differences. Women in the gender divided group spoke of deep disappointment that their male partners did not respond to them emotionally, but seemed resigned to this state. Thus, neither partner was intentional regarding shared time, and couples reported very limited time together and did not speak of emotional attunement or friendship. In the elusive group, wives sometimes initiated shared time, which both partners enjoyed. These couples described feeling helpless and unable to find time together because of the time demands of their schedules. However, both women and men tended to describe women as more emotionally "needy" than men, suggesting that time together was primarily a woman's issue. Couples growing in shared time reported similar issues, but described intentional efforts by both partners to overcome them, with men often saying they had been influenced by their wives and become more attuned to her over time. This gendered difference in approach to emotional time may help explain why some women in the Rauer and Volling (2013) study expressed more ambivalence despite reporting overall commitment to the relationship.

Finally, we found a recursive relationship between couples' shared time and the depth of their intimacy experience; each experience mutually impacting the nature and frequency of the other. The most emotionally connected couples found positive time together reinforcing. Thus, couples with high levels of shared time also described more satisfaction and pleasure from their relationships. Interestingly, none of the couples in this study of stable relationships described the destructive cycle of pursuit and distance common in a clinical sample (e.g., Wile, 2013). Instead, many men seemed grateful for the women's leadership in maintaining intimacy, or in some cases, women also seemed to accept less time together despite their stated preference for more emotional connection.

LIMITATION AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The sample for this study was relatively well educated and many participants held professional jobs. Less affluent couples may experience time together quite differently or use another framework for intimacy. Data for this study were also taken from a larger, ongoing investigation of couples' relational processes; thus interviews did not specifically focus on the construction of intimacy in shared time. More in-depth study is needed to explain why some couples are able to transcend gender divides in their approach to intimacy and how the processes identified here may intersect with family of origin issues, experiences of interpersonal trauma, and vulnerability cycles (e.g., Carter & Carter, 2010; Huenergardt & Knudson-Martin, 2009; Johnson, 2002; Scheinkman & Fishbane, 2004). How the gender differences in emotional attending identified in this study correspond to the division of child care and household tasks also needs to be explored (Gerson, 2011).

Similarly, ethnic diversity was present in each of the four types of shared time identified in this analysis; however, future study targeting variations in cultural meanings would add contextual nuance to these findings, as would longitudinal study that tracks how intimacy as shared time may change over life transitions. Research with distressed

couples or those in therapy could also further clarify how intimacy and shared time are connected. Finally, a follow-up quantitative study with a larger sample size using shared time as the independent variable could add to the generalizability of the results in relation to both intimacy and relationship satisfaction.

Implications for Practice

The four factors that distinguished how couples in this study organized shared time suggest potential areas for clinical focus, especially among those who seek a greater synchrony in time together (e.g., Fraenkel, 2011) or are caught in impasses regarding vulnerability (Scheinkman & Fishbane, 2004) and distance regulation (Wile, 2013):

- (1) Address gender stereotypes. A socio-emotional approach (e.g., Knudson-Martin & Huenergardt, 2010) that begins with attention to how gender may organize relational experience and narrative approaches (e.g., Dickerson, 2013) that bring forth preferred ways of relating outside of patriarchal effects will help couples overcome gender stereotypes that limit intimacy.
- (2) Develop intentional relationship focus. Fraenkel (2011) uses musical metaphors such as “syncing,” “practicing new rhythms,” and “pacing” to help couples intentionally construct their time together. Therapists can help men as well as women apply these principles to their relationships.
- (3) Focus on mutual attending. Approaches that encourage both partners to attend to relational needs and support emotional expression (e.g., Goldman & Greenberg, 2013; Greenman & Johnson, 2013) will help couples experience mutuality in their shared time. Gender differences in the meaning of vulnerability when engaging in emotional risk taking should be addressed (Carter & Carter, 2010).
- (4) Reinforce habits of friendship. Couples who enjoy being together treat each other well and this enhances intimacy. As partners become more accepting and tolerant of each other, time together becomes more positive (Gurman, 2013). Emotionally connected partners in this study love to laugh and talk with each other. This makes them safe partners in times of stress and promotes enjoyment of the relationship and increased sexual pleasure.

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