



Received: 13 April 2020  
Accepted: 28 March 2022

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## SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Pertinent African accounts of ambivalence and benefits in commuter marriages

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**Abstract:** The article attempts to unpack the ambivalence and benefits of commuter marriages. The study applied a qualitative paradigm, as well as a qualitative approach to investigate 17 participants between the ages of 30 to 52 (13 women and 4 men), of various occupations including bankers, civil/public servants, businessmen and women, lecturers, lawyers, teachers, managers of private organisations politicians, sales representatives, and medical doctors. All of them were married, had children and engaged in commuter marriages, but with the men being commuters while the women remained in the primary residence. The participants had an average of two children each. Data was analyzed thematically. Findings established ambivalence in commuter marriages; and underscored the benefits of commuter marriages, such as improved quality of life, opportunity to focus on work, personal goals and offering respite for leisure, and lessened women's bouts of stress to prepare meal for their husbands.

**Subjects:** Anthropology - Soc Sci; Gender Studies - Soc Sci; Sociology & Social Policy

**Keywords:** commuter marriages; family; gender; ambivalence; benefits

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### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This research focuses on the ambivalence and benefits that married people experience in commuter marriages. The data was collected from seventeen participants in Jos, Nigeria. The participants had about 2 children each, and they commuted for varied lengths of time. Feelings of ambivalence—unhappiness and joy—were experienced by some of the participants as commuting couples. Benefits of commuter marriages that the participants experienced included leisure time, opportunities to concentrate on work and individual goals, improved quality of life, and reduced time spent by the women participants in preparing meals for their husbands.

## 1. Introduction

A commuter marriage is the union between a dual earning couple, or dual career couple, wherein the husband and wife decide to live apart due to work and family commitments until such a time when it is convenient for them to live continuously together again (Lindemann, 2017; Ralph, 2015). This geographical separation is often undertaken to improve the couple's financial and career prospects (Aletraris, 2016; Glotzer & Federlein, 2007; Kholisoh & Astuti, 2018; Lindemann, 2018; Qiu, 2019; Rabe, 2001). One spouse, usually the husband, lives and works in a secondary home away from his family and regularly goes to the primary home, where the wife and children reside (Aletraris, 2016; Glotzer & Federlein, 2007; Lindemann, 2018). In Nigeria, some people jokingly refer to spousal relationships, such as those of commuter marriages where the spouses do not live together, as MTN marriages. This joke is in reference to one of the popular telecommunication service providers in Nigeria, since using cell phones is one of the easiest and most convenient ways for the couples to communicate as they live apart. The societal assumption is that married people ought to occupy a single residence and not live apart. This article describes the commuter relationships studied in Jos, Nigeria. While collecting the data, participants were split into two categories of adjusting and established couples, and data was collected from the wives and/or husbands. In this study, adjusting couples are those who had been married for less than 10 years, while established couples are those who had been married for 10 years or more. The findings were reported taking these categories into consideration. The objective of this study is to explore the feelings of ambivalence and benefits present in Nigerian commuter marriages.

## 2. Overview of commuter marriages

Scholarly interest in commuting couples has consistently risen, with concerns and attention given to dual earner and dual career couples, as these relate to work and family relationships. The book, published by Naomi Gerstel and Harriet Gross in (Gerstel & Gross, 1984) titled "*Commuter Marriage: A Study of Work and Family*", is one of the earliest introductions to the topic. Historically, couples have been known to separate for long periods of time in order to work in various occupations and also as migrant labourers (Fiatkowska, 2019). The concept of commuter marriages, or couples not living together on a daily basis, is thus not necessarily a new phenomenon. Commuter marriages stem from work commitments when a commute occurs because one spouse is working or pursuing a career away from home, usually within the same national borders, and sometimes, across borders (Lindemann, 2017). McBride and Bergen (2014) define a commuter marriage as a type of long-distance marriage characterised by spouses living in different locations during the work week (but sometimes for longer periods of time) to accommodate the careers of both partners. Commuter marriages occur when couples make the decision for one spouse to leave the home of residence or regular territory to get a job making the necessary arrangements to pursue their different careers. One spouse usually does the commuting while the other spouse stays at a place agreed upon to be the primary residence where the non-commuting spouse carries on with his/her own work during the time the commuting spouse is away. This home base is also most likely where their children reside (Lee, 2018). One school of thought is that commuter couples are not so different from families which are not commuting (Anderson & Spruill, 1993; Johari et al., 2020) while another contention is that commuter couples are very different from families living together (Gerstel & Gross, 1984; McBride & Bergen, 2014). This distinction arises from the observation that couples in commuter marriages still perform their traditionally assigned roles, such as the husband being the provider and going out to work while the wife stays at home (or also has a career) assuming the responsibilities of childcare, grocery shopping, cooking and cleaning. The second school of thought, however, argues that commuter marriages are more egalitarian than traditional forms of marriage, and both spouses perform different functions as seems best for the running of their individual lives and the family as a whole (Lee, 2018; Lindemann, 2018).

A similar family arrangement to commuter families is migrant families. Migrant couples may not necessarily share an egalitarian relationship when compared with commuter couples (Cooke, 2008; Lui & Chiang, 2012; Van der Klis & Mulder, 2008). Commuter couples jointly decide that the commuter relationship should ensue and often agree that it will not linger for an indefinite period of time. A point of variation between migrant couples and commuter couples is that with migrant couples, the partner who migrates

may stay away from the family for a longer period at a time than that of a commuting partner. Where a commuting partner can be expected to be home every fortnight or thereabouts, a migrant partner may be gone for a more extended period of time before going back to his or her family. One reason for this may be the cost of travel (2006; Adepoju, 2005). Examples of migrant families were seen in rural-urban migration in South Africa during the apartheid era. This type of migrant family was brought about by the past apartheid regime in South Africa, and it is different from the experiences in other countries (Kok & Collinson, 2006).

### 3. Commuter marriages in Nigeria

Commuter marriages/couples are under studied in Nigeria. Commuter marriages, in the Nigerian context, are not seen as conventional even though dual-earner marriages are not unusual (Fasoranti & Olusola, 2012). What is typically observed are scenarios where one spouse (usually the husbands) is actively engaged in a career/job that gives greater socio-economic rewards. These jobs require that the husbands leave their home of primary residence, while the other spouse (the wives) is engaged in schooling, part-time work, business and/or a full-time job. The characteristics of home life in the Nigerian commuter marriages are very similar to those of other commuter marriages around the world (Lindemann, 2017; Ralph, 2015). A major difference between commuter marriages in Nigeria and those around the world is that men choose to commute and leave their wives behind due to socio-economic reasons and not necessarily because their wives choose to stay behind for the sake of their jobs. Usually, this move is welcomed by the family because the social and economic cost of moving with the husband to his place of work is often enormous (Lee, 2018).

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Research design

A qualitative research methodology (Lune & Berg, 2017) was deemed best suited for this study. The qualitative method was informed by the epistemological nature of the research which views how the actions of actors shape their world, as this study concerns couples in a commuter marriage. All the participants in this study resided in Jos, Nigeria, were married, had children, and were in commuter marriages for a year or more. Only the men in this study commuted, while all the women in this study remained in the primary residence.

### 4.2. Participants

This study's participants comprised seventeen participants; thirteen women and four men. The participants represent a wide range of occupations including bankers, civil or public servants, businessmen and women, lecturers, lawyers, teachers, managers of private organisations, accountants, politicians, sales representatives and medical doctors. The occupational categories of participants show a high educational status as most of them have at least tertiary education. The ages of participants ranged from 30 years to 52 years. The participants had an average of two children each—three participants had four children, seven participants had one child each, four participants had two children each and three participants had three children each.

(Gerstel & Gross's, 1984) categorisation of commuting couples was used to classify couples in the present study. Gerstel and Gross (1984) proposed that there are two types of commuter couples: first there are adjusting couples who are younger couples both in terms of age and the number of years married with young children. The second group is called established couples who are older, married for a number of years with older children, some of whom may have left the house. In this study, adjusting couples represent those who were younger in age and had been married for less than ten years and the established couples refer to those who are older and had been married for ten years and more. Twelve participants fell in the adjusting category and five in the established category. On their commuting history, four of the adjusting couples started commuting from the onset of the marriage, and three indicated that their commuter marriage began with long-distance courtships which culminated into commuter marriages. The least number of years for which participants were engaged in a commute is two years, and the longest is 21 years.

### **4.3. Procedure**

A total of seventeen participants, comprising thirteen women and four men, took part in this study. Convenience sampling (Frey, 2018) was used to identify potential participants whose marital living arrangements were known to be those of commuter couples. This was done by asking family and friends to help identify commuter couples in Jos, Nigeria. In addition to convenience sampling, snowball sampling was used to identify more potential participants. In using snowball sampling, the initial participants were asked to help identify more participants. In snowball sampling, participants are usually expected to know the identity of other members in the same population. This process allows the researcher to identify participant(s) with the characteristics that the researcher is seeking and then asking the participant(s) to identify other people with the same characteristics.

Seventeen in-depth interviews, one focus group interview and time diaries were used to collect data from participants on the subject of commuter marriages. Although the interviews were the primary data collection tool, the diaries provided additional information that participants may not have recalled or considered important enough to mention during the interviews. The initial interviews were supported by follow-up interviews to determine if there was any change in the participants' commuter relationships and also to clarify some questions that arose while interpreting the initial data. Data collection was concluded when data saturation occurred. Hennink et al. (2017) refer to saturation as the point in data collection and analysis when no new information emerges from the data.

### **4.4. Data analysis**

The data was analysed by doing a thematic analysis. This was done by reading and re-reading the data; that is, the transcriptions of the interviews, focus group discussion and diary entries, so as to identify themes. Guest et al. (2012) note that the process and application of thematic analysis involves a rigorous approach to identify themes from the data collected either through interviews or any other qualitative technique in a bid to present the voices of participants in a credible and transparent manner, and identified themes are coded and used to build theoretical models or used to find solutions to issues raised by proper analysis based on knowledge of the field of research. Ethical considerations were observed in this study. An ethical clearance certificate for this study was granted before data collection by the University of South Africa (UNISA). Further, informed consent was obtained from the participants; all the participants in this study took part willingly. The participants were kept anonymous by assigning pseudonyms to them to protect their identities, and they were not exposed to harm.

## **5. Findings**

### **5.1. Ambivalence in commuter marriages**

Ambivalence is used in this study to depict the mixed feelings of unhappiness and joy that are experienced by the participants in commuter marriages. Commuting couples had feelings of ambivalence when they considered their marital relationship status. The ambivalent feelings of some marriage commuters in the study are noted below:

Sometimes I feel like I'm in prison period, I think of the best way to make the best of this seeming inconvenience ... I think of John Bunyan, who wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress* and say to myself, I can sing ... it's just a way of consoling myself ... I like it because, no disturbance from children or wife, that could disturb my creativity, I could write songs. I try to use that period to think, be alone, these are some of my best periods (Samson M AC<sup>1</sup>).

Sometimes when you are lonely, things begin to cross my mind, why is it that even my wife has not come to visit and see where I am ... so that I'll even know if we should be here or not ... I miss them, and I think I should not even be there [at the secondary residence] at all ... I don't think there is anything I like at all about being apart, but sometimes it gives you

the freedom and time to do certain things, for example, I'm writing a book and I have the time to do that but sometimes I say, I don't need this time, let me go and be with my family (Emmanuel M AC).

Isaac experienced conflicting thoughts similar to those of Emmanuel and Samson:

Sometimes I think of putting off the career to be at home and watch my children grow, sometimes I think it's not worth it ... I would like to take care of me and my family, not worry about the rest of the country and trying to make a difference (Isaac M AC).

Isaac felt that there is nothing he liked about the commuter relationship but later on admitted that it gave him time to focus on certain goals he wanted to achieve.

### **5.2. Benefits of commuter marriages**

These benefits are the positive factors that commuters attach to commuting. A gendered division on the benefits of commuter marriages, as well as fluidity in gender roles between commuter wives and husbands, was found in this study. The benefits of commuter marriages, as narrated by the participants in this study are:

### **5.3. Improved quality of life**

The perceived benefits of commuting to some particular states within Nigeria or residing in some particular locations for their unique opportunities, such as better quality of life and serenity are presented here. Some participants narrated that the places they are stationed are beneficial, and this made the commuter experience more bearable for them.

I like the school the children are at in Lagos. I love their performance [the children's progress at school]. When they got to Lagos, it was almost difficult for her [his daughter] to cope because the school in Jos was not that good ... the few schools here in Jos that can give the quality of education my children are receiving in Lagos is too expensive (Henry M AC).

In Henry's case, he used the opportunity that was presented to him and his family by the commute to boost the educational level of his children and see better results in their academic performance than when they were schooled in Jos. Jos may have better amenities and facilities compared to younger states such as Taraba (Jalingo is the state capital), but when compared to big cities and older states like Lagos (Nigeria's first capital city and now the commercial capital), better schools and amenities are available. Also, generally, the public schools in Nigeria have poor funding and infrastructure due to the long history of misappropriation of funds and negligence on the part of the different administrations to address proper education in Nigeria. This has made the private school sector in Nigeria more viable. With the private sector being so competitive, private schools are perceived to offer good education with various kinds of curricula. All the participants' children attended private schools.

I like the children's school and sense of community ... Jos is stress free compared to Lagos schools, that have a different mentality, it's like they are not real, too much effizy [Nigerian slang for flamboyance, showiness and extravagance] that does not warrant anything ... (Chizo F EC<sup>2</sup>).

Even though she had to take a pay cut, Chizo maintained that she liked Jos and her children's school. The school Chizo referred to, is an American missionary school established in 1942, which has maintained its standards and values amidst Nigeria's failing educational system. She was also glad to be able to keep physically fit and have quality family time due to less traffic congestion. Big cities like Lagos are notorious for heavy traffic, which makes commuters dread the long hours it takes to move around the city.

#### **5.4. Focus on work, personal goals and leisure time**

Participants mentioned that a commuting lifestyle helped them focus on work and personal goals, and this gave them a sense of satisfaction and fulfilment.

No one feels like they are being abandoned, held back or abandoning [their] dreams. I'm fulfilled, no one feels that they are being cheated [by not being able to pursue their dreams] or waiting around for the other to fulfil their dream, like I'm just at home, supporting you. Everyone is satisfied, everyone is fulfilled (Uzo F AC<sup>3</sup>).

Emmanuel opined that his family is not a disturbance to him, but he could get things done better when he is away from his family because he has fewer distractions, and this gave him the opportunity to think strategically for better financial rewards.

They [his family] are not really a disturbance, but I can do things as the house is quiet, my son is not jumping on me ... sometimes I just want to be alone ... I'm in Delta [a state in Nigeria] for a reason ... It's putting me in a position to think and develop strategies for better financial gains (Emmanuel M AC).

Samson reported that being alone gave him the opportunity to think and be creative; he values this as an artist. He admitted that he should be able to process his thoughts when his family is around him but he cherished the intermittent times of being away from the family.

I try to use that period [when he is away from his family] to think, be alone, these are some of my best periods. I like it because, no disturbance from children or wife, that could disturb my creativity. I should be able though to process my thoughts in spite of them being around ... (Samson M AC).

Samson's wife treasured the times her husband was away. Those times gave her the opportunity to indulge in some activities that she enjoys when her husband is not with her and their two little children:

"That period when he is not around is a beautiful time to pray, study and relax ... I do those things I've not done ... use the opportunity to do what I want" (Dinah F AC).

The men's narratives suggest that they focus on work during the work week and family during their times at home, which is usually on the weekends. As the male participants do not have the children living with them, they had time to focus entirely on work and their own interests. Hence, they were on one track at work and on another track when they were home. There is thus a clear separation for these men between work life and family life in commuter relationships.

#### **5.5. Meal preparation**

The women talked a lot about not having the daily burden of preparing meals for their husbands. This is one of the main household tasks they get some relief from when their husbands are not at home. Ruth disclosed that when her husband came home, it seemed she was constantly in the kitchen as she cooked for him daily. She reported that if she and her husband were not physically separated in a commuter marriage, she would have been used to being in the kitchen every day and not see it as a difficult task when she and her husband are together. She is thus re-evaluating gender expectations due to her experiences in a commuter relationship.

"I feel very selfish. Like I don't have to worry about what to cook, who has eaten [when her husband is away from their primary residence] ... there were times that he would come and I would feel like 'I have to live in the kitchen now'" (Ruth F EC).



Even though Tina continued to cook nutritious meals for her children in the absence of her husband, she considered this is as less stressful than cooking when her husband was home, particularly as she did not have to cook for her husband's guests as well.

“As a wife, you cook. My husband likes fresh food. I think that's the part I enjoy now, I don't have to cook 24 hours a day. You need to cook for the children and cook up healthy meals for them [when her husband is away], but not so much stress. If my husband were to be around, he'll invite 100 people to the house and I have to do so much ...” (Tina F EC).

Other participants added: “*When he is not around, we cook whatever we want to eat because he is a picky eater*” (Dinah F AC). “*I don't have to worry about going home to cook for him and his little needs, basically it's me and baby ... so I really can't say I have complaints*” (Saratu F AC).

Whilst women recounted the joy of not cooking daily when their husbands are not at home, one of the husbands reported that he missed his wife's food whenever he is not with her but copes by preparing quick and easy meals:

“I love food ... I get excited when I see her cooking the good dishes, but I can default to my easy indomie [instant noodles] which I can do for myself [when he is away from home] ...” (Isaac M AC).

Isaac reported that he can make do when it comes to eating by preparing instant noodles with sausages and eggs when he is away, and “eats properly” when he is back home in Jos. Isaac's understanding of eating properly refers to traditional home cooked meals prepared by his wife.

## 6. Discussion

With a focus on Nigeria, this study sought to fill the gap in knowledge that exists on commuter marriages in Nigeria and Africa. It was found that women and men experience contradictory feelings of enjoyment and dislike for commuter marriages. These are embodied in the participants' feelings of ambivalence and benefits. Ambivalence is described by Sun (2017) as multi-layered feelings and competing perspectives of family relations while reacting to physical distance in the family. This manifests as conflicting emotions and feelings towards a particular experience as was found in the accounts of the men in this study. Connidis et al. (2017) note that at different points of the life course, family ties could involve more, or less, ambivalence. This occurrence may be because it is the men who are mostly on the commuter trail, having to leave their wives in the house of primary residence due to decisions they undoubtedly made for the good of the family.

Lee (2015) recounts some positive factors associated with commuting, such as acquiring economic leverage, having leisure time, especially for commuter wives, in which to pursue things that are of interest to them without spousal interference. This is understandable as this study found that women bear a large burden of care in the commuting home. Gregorio (2020) refers to commuter wives as weekend warriors because they spend the weekend proving to their family and neighbours that they are still wives to their husbands, and mothers to their children especially when the families are together. The women in this study explained that one of their duties as “good wives” is to cook for the family and they embraced this role, but they were relieved that they did not have to cook every day whenever their husbands were not in the primary residence. Allanana (2013, p. 115) notes that Nigerian society is patriarchal, wherein it is generally opined that the “best place for women is in the Kitchen (sic)” The narratives of the women in this study confirm Allanana's assertion as they did the cooking for their families, even when their husbands were present in their primary residence. Another reason why commuter wives in this study were glad to be relieved of cooking is that some Nigerian dishes are difficult and time consuming to prepare. Some ingredients have to be bought on a daily basis as they perish quickly and cannot be preserved through refrigeration due to frequent power outages. This translates to daily market trips to source fresh produce with which to prepare meals. Prudence in their finances is required of

the wives because they often needed cash to be able to stop by the market regularly in order to purchase ingredients for meals. The burden of meal preparation, as well as making sure there were enough ingredients to prepare the next meal, rested on the wives. Being free of this burden, even if only during the working week, was welcomed by the female participants. Cooking for husbands by Nigerian wives, is a daunting task that requires thought, detail and preparedness.

A strong gender division of labour within households is seen in the participants' narratives on food preparation. Lindemann (2018) refers to this as "undoing gender" as it relates to household obligations. It was found that male participants cooked because that they lived on their own whenever they were away from their primary residence, and female participants were relieved of cumbersome meal preparation during their husbands' absence. Both the male and female participants reported that they prepare meals regularly when apart. However, the expectation is that when they are together, the wives fall back into the role of primary cook. Thus, being apart led to flexible gendered household labour, but once the couples were together again, the rigid division of labour is in place and not questioned by either party. The notion of the participants in this study that cooking and household chores are the domain of women is rooted in the Nigerian culture and tradition (Akanle et al., 2016). However, this cultural disposition is changing due to the influence of modernisation and urbanisation; hence some Nigerian men now engage in household chores ((Akanle et al., 2016)). There is a disparity in the involvement of men in household chores in Nigeria. Men from a low socio-economic class believe that household chores are strictly to be done by women, particularly when men are the breadwinners. Some of the men from the low socio-economic class opine that it is taboo for men to engage in household chores and the reason why some men do so is because they are bewitched by their wives, and that only men who are not able to financially provide for their wives and/or families, do such chores. On the flipside of the coin, men from a higher socio-economic class saw nothing wrong in carrying out household chores or doing such alongside their wives. Factors which influenced men's views on household chores were identified as education and early childhood socialisation into household chores (Akanle et al., 2016). The thinking that domestic chores are primarily done by women is not peculiar to the participants of this study and Nigeria; other studies (Arora, 2015; Cerrato & Cifre, 2018; Chhabra, 2015; Midgette, 2019; Putnick & Bornstein, 2018; Ruppanner, 2010; Ruppanner & Treas, 2015) indicate that this mindset and practice is peculiar to other parts of Africa and the world.

### **7. Implications**

The findings of this study have a gender implication. It was only men who commuted, while women did not. Also, this study reported a gendered dimension in the care of households and their members, with women bearing the brunt edge of taking care of their husbands and children, and taking up the cooking of meals for their families. An interesting finding of this study is that even though men in this study did not cook while they were in the primary residence, they took up cooking for themselves whenever they were away from the primary residence. This indicates that men can cook but choose not to whenever they are with their wives. A major reason for this is explained by Allanana (2013, p. 115) who argues that the kitchen is regarded as the domain of women. Further, engagement in commuting for the commuting couples had a financial implication. The drive was to save as much as is possible to better their livelihood.

### **8. Limitations**

A major limitation of this study is in the sample composition. The commuting individuals in this study were only men, none of the women participants commuted. It would have been interesting to explore the views of women who commute in marriages. This is an avenue for future research. Furthermore, although the sample of this study provided insights into commuter marriages, the small sample size does not allow for generalisation.

### **9. Conclusion**

The ambivalence and benefits that are inherent in Nigerian commuter marriages were explored in this study. These experiences were narrated by couples who were in commuter marriages, and



they include: ambivalence in commuter marriages—which was demonstrated in the conflicting feelings of enjoying and not enjoying being in commuter marriages; and benefits of commuter marriages—improved quality of life, ability to focus on work, personal goals and leisure time, reduced domestic responsibilities on the part of the wife as it relates to reduced meals preparation. There are variants of couples who live apart (Gerstel & Gross, 1984; Lindemann, 2017), and various motivations for couples to live apart (Jamison, 2018; McRae & Cobb, 2020). Couples who live apart in Jos demonstrate the validity of these statements. Commuting availed couples in this study the opportunity to provide a better standard of living for their families.

#### Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the reviewers of this article for their constructive criticism of the earlier drafts of this document.

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#### Citation information

Cite this article as: Pertinent African accounts of ambivalence and benefits in commuter marriages, Sahmicit Kankemwa Kumswa, Caroline Agboola & Simon Kang'Ethe, *Cogent Social Sciences* (2022), 8: 2060537.

#### Notes

1. M AC represents male adjusting couple throughout this paper.
2. F EC represents female established couple throughout this paper.
3. F AC represents female adjusting couple throughout this paper.

#### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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