

Holding Space within Love: Personal Space, Selfhood, and Intimacy in Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

Romantic relationship research has traditionally emphasized cohabitation and shared domestic space as markers of commitment and relational stability. However, many contemporary romantic partnerships involve individuals who maintain separate residences due to developmental stage, educational trajectories, or other social circumstances. Within such contexts, the experience and interpretation of personal space become central relational processes. The present qualitative study explored how individuals in committed romantic relationships construct meaning around personal time and autonomy within their partnerships. Guided by a phenomenological orientation, the study examined lived experiences of personal space and its relational significance. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 participants aged 20–25 years who were involved in romantic relationships lasting between six months and five years. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. Five interrelated themes were identified: autonomy and preservation of individual identity, communication and relational boundary negotiation, internalized relational expectations shaping interpretations of space, developmental reframing of personal time, and the influence of familial and cultural narratives on experiences of autonomy. Findings suggest that personal space was experienced as supporting emotional regulation and identity maintenance while simultaneously requiring communicative reassurance within relationships. Rather than representing relational distance, personal time was often experienced as supporting intimacy by enabling individuals to maintain a coherent sense of self. The study contributes to relationship science by illustrating how autonomy and intimacy are dynamically integrated within contemporary romantic partnerships.

Keywords: personal space, autonomy, intimacy, relational boundaries

1. Introduction

1.1 Broad Context of Intimacy and Individuality

Romantic relationships are commonly associated with emotional closeness, shared experiences, and a sense of connection between partners. At the same time, intimate relationships involve individuals who bring their own identities, interests, routines, and emotional needs into the partnership. Maintaining a sense of individuality may therefore be an important part of experiencing and sustaining intimacy. The relationship between closeness and individuality becomes particularly relevant when considering how individuals understand the time they spend together and apart from their partners.

Personal space within an intimate relationship can take many forms, including time spent alone, pursuing individual interests, maintaining friendships, engaging in personal routines, or simply having opportunities

for reflection away from the relationship. Although such experiences may appear separate from intimacy, they can form an important part of how individuals regulate themselves, maintain a sense of identity, and engage with their partners. Understanding personal space therefore requires attention not only to physical distance, but also to the meanings individuals attach to time apart within the context of an ongoing relationship.

1.2 Contemporary Romantic Relationships and Separate Residences

Romantic relationships have traditionally been examined alongside markers of commitment such as marriage and cohabitation. Shared residence has frequently been associated with relationship progression, commitment, and stability [1]. However, contemporary romantic relationships may follow trajectories that differ from these traditional patterns. Extended education, delayed marriage, and changing social expectations have contributed to relationship arrangements in which partners may remain committed while maintaining separate residences, particularly during early adulthood.

For partners who do not share a household, time spent together and apart may require a different form of negotiation. Unlike cohabiting couples, whose daily routines naturally create opportunities for both interaction and separation, partners living separately may have greater independence over how they organise their time. Within these relationships, personal time can therefore acquire particular relational significance. Time apart may be experienced as an opportunity for individual reflection and emotional regulation, while differences in expectations surrounding closeness and availability may also influence how that time is interpreted.

1.3 Personal Space as the Phenomenon of Interest

The experience of personal space is not necessarily determined by the amount of time partners spend apart, but by the meaning that individuals assign to that experience. Personal time may allow individuals to engage with their interests, reconnect with themselves, manage emotional demands, and maintain aspects of their identity outside the relationship. At the same time, requests for personal space may be interpreted differently depending on an individual's expectations about intimacy, communication, and relational security. The meaning of personal space may also develop over the course of a relationship. Experiences that initially create uncertainty may become more easily accepted as trust and familiarity develop between partners. Similarly, beliefs about closeness may be shaped by previous relationships, family environments, and broader cultural expectations surrounding togetherness and commitment. Personal space can therefore be understood as an experience that is both individual and relational, shaped by how partners communicate, negotiate, and make meaning of time apart.

1.4 Research Gap

Existing relationship research has examined intimacy, autonomy, attachment, solitude, and relationship functioning, offering important insight into how individuals experience closeness and independence within romantic relationships. However, comparatively less attention has been given to the lived experience of personal space among young adults in committed, non-cohabiting relationships. In particular, less is known about how individuals understand the need for personal time, communicate these needs to their partners, and negotiate time apart while maintaining emotional connection. A qualitative exploration of these experiences may therefore provide a more nuanced understanding of how personal space is experienced as part of everyday intimacy, and how its meaning is shaped by autonomy, communication, relational expectations, and wider familial and cultural influences.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Intimacy, Autonomy and Individuality in Romantic Relationships

Romantic relationships involve emotional closeness, shared experiences, and a sense of connection between partners, while individuals continue to maintain their own identities, preferences, and needs. Understanding how intimacy and individuality coexist is therefore central to understanding relationship functioning. Sternberg's (1986) Triangular Theory of Love conceptualises intimacy as one of the three fundamental components of love, alongside passion and commitment [2]. From this perspective, intimacy involves feelings of closeness, connectedness, and emotional bonding between partners.

While intimacy highlights the importance of connection, maintaining individuality within a relationship may also be important for relational well-being. Self-Determination Theory provides a useful framework for understanding this balance. Deci and Ryan (2000) identify autonomy and relatedness as fundamental psychological needs [3]. Autonomy concerns experiencing oneself as capable of making meaningful choices and acting with a sense of volition, while relatedness concerns the need to experience meaningful connection with others. Within romantic relationships, these needs can coexist, allowing individuals to experience personal agency while remaining emotionally connected to their partners.

Empirical research has also examined how autonomy operates within romantic relationships. Hadden, Baker, and Knee (2018) found across four studies that relationship autonomy, defined in terms of having more self-determined reasons for remaining committed to a relationship, was associated with more constructive responses to partner transgressions [4]. Their dyadic findings further suggested that a partner's relationship autonomy was relevant to pro-relationship responses. These findings indicate that autonomy within a relationship does not necessarily imply reduced investment in the partnership and may instead coexist with behaviours that support relationship functioning.

The importance of emotional connection alongside individual needs is also reflected in couple therapy literature. Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy places considerable emphasis on developing secure emotional connection while recognising the individual emotional experiences and needs that partners bring into the relationship [5]. This perspective highlights that intimacy involves responsiveness to one another while still allowing partners to experience and communicate their individual needs.

Relationship quality is similarly important when considering how individuals experience autonomy and intimacy. Kamp Dush and Amato (2005) found that both relationship status and relationship quality were associated with subjective well-being, highlighting the broader psychological significance of romantic relationships [6]. However, relationship quality alone does not capture how individuals experience the everyday negotiation between being connected to a partner and maintaining aspects of life outside the relationship. Personal space can therefore be considered within the broader relationship between intimacy, autonomy, and individuality. Time spent alone, engagement in individual interests, and opportunities for personal reflection may represent ways in which individuals maintain a sense of self while continuing to participate in an intimate partnership.

2.2 Attachment, Closeness and the Meaning of Time Apart

Attachment theory provides another framework for understanding how individuals may experience closeness and separation within intimate relationships. Bowlby (1988) proposed that early relationships with significant caregivers contribute to the development of internal working models that influence expectations about relationships and the availability of others [7]. These expectations may continue to shape interpersonal experiences across later relationships. Within romantic relationships, experiences of time apart may therefore carry different meanings for different individuals. Personal space may be

experienced as ordinary and restorative by one individual while creating uncertainty or concern for another. A request for personal time may consequently be interpreted through expectations surrounding closeness, availability, and emotional security.

Zhang and Li (2021) provide particularly relevant empirical evidence for this relationship between solitude and attachment [8]. Their study examined 105 married couples in mainland China and investigated how time spent alone was associated with marital satisfaction, as well as whether attachment style moderated these associations. Their findings demonstrated that the relationship between solitude and marital satisfaction was complex and varied according to attachment-related characteristics and cross-partner effects. Although their study focused on married couples rather than young adults in non-cohabiting relationships, it provides useful evidence that time spent alone can have relational significance and cannot necessarily be understood as an individual experience in isolation. It also highlights the importance of considering how partners' experiences of solitude may intersect within an intimate relationship. Attachment therefore provides a useful lens through which personal space can be understood. Rather than assuming that time apart has an inherently positive or negative meaning, examining how individuals interpret that experience may provide greater insight into the relationship between personal space and intimacy.

2.3 Differentiation, Selfhood and Relational Boundaries

The relationship between individuality and emotional connection is also central to Bowen's concept of differentiation of self. Bowen (1978) described differentiation as the capacity to maintain a coherent sense of self while remaining emotionally connected to significant others [9]. From this perspective, healthy relational functioning involves maintaining one's individuality without becoming emotionally disconnected from others. This concept is particularly relevant to personal space within romantic relationships. Individual activities, interests, friendships, and time spent alone may provide opportunities for individuals to maintain aspects of their identity outside the romantic partnership. Personal space may therefore represent one way in which individuals preserve a sense of self while remaining emotionally involved in a relationship.

Empirical research provides support for the relevance of differentiation to couple functioning. Lampis et al. (2019) examined differentiation of self and dyadic adjustment among 137 heterosexual couples using a dyadic design [10]. Their findings indicated that dimensions of differentiation were associated with dyadic adjustment and that both individual and partner characteristics were relevant to relationship functioning. These findings provide empirical support for the idea that maintaining a differentiated sense of self can coexist with, and be relevant to, functioning within an intimate partnership.

The distinction between individuality and emotional withdrawal is therefore important. Differentiation does not imply disengagement from a partner. Instead, it concerns the capacity to maintain a sense of self while remaining emotionally connected. Personal time may consequently provide opportunities for individuals to engage with interests, relationships, and activities outside the partnership without necessarily reducing emotional commitment to the relationship. This also highlights the relational nature of boundaries. Personal boundaries are not established independently of the partner; they are communicated, interpreted, and negotiated between individuals. A request for personal time may therefore require communication and mutual understanding, particularly when partners hold different expectations about availability and togetherness.

2.4 Emerging Adulthood and Contemporary Romantic Relationships

The developmental context in which romantic relationships occur is particularly relevant to the present st-

udy. Emerging adulthood is a period in which individuals may experience changes in identity, increasing independence, and transitions across educational, occupational, residential, and relational contexts. Romantic relationships during this period may therefore develop alongside significant changes in how individuals understand themselves and their relationships with others.

Research indicates that romantic relationships during emerging adulthood are diverse rather than representing a single uniform experience. Beckmeyer and Jamison (2021) identified five types of emerging adult romantic relationships based on dimensions including relational dynamics, intimacy, and commitment [11]. Their findings demonstrated meaningful variation across relationship types, with differences also observed in factors such as current cohabitation and well-being. This suggests that emerging adults may experience and organise romantic relationships in substantially different ways, making it important to consider relationship context when examining individual experiences of intimacy and independence.

Contemporary romantic relationships may also differ from traditional relationship trajectories in which marriage and cohabitation are treated as relatively clear markers of commitment and progression. Perelli-Harris and Bernardi (2015) highlight the importance of social norms in shaping attitudes toward cohabitation and relationship formation [1]. Relationship structures are therefore influenced not only by individual preferences but also by wider social expectations concerning partnership, marriage, and appropriate relationship behaviour.

The relationship between relationship structure and well-being also suggests that the form a relationship takes does not, by itself, determine its psychological significance. Kamp Dush and Amato (2005) found that relationship quality was important in understanding subjective well-being alongside relationship status [6]. This provides a useful basis for considering relationships in which partners may remain committed without sharing a residence.

For emerging adults, maintaining separate residences may reflect educational circumstances, developing careers, financial considerations, family contexts, geographic circumstances, or personal preferences. The absence of shared residence does not necessarily indicate an absence of commitment, but it may influence how partners organise their time and communicate expectations around closeness and independence. This makes non-cohabiting relationships particularly relevant to understanding personal space. When partners maintain separate residences, time together and time apart may require more deliberate negotiation, creating a context in which individuals may actively communicate how much independence and connection they want within the relationship.

2.5 Family, Culture and Relational Expectations

Romantic relationships do not develop independently of the social and familial contexts in which individuals are embedded. Expectations regarding closeness, independence, communication, and commitment may be influenced by family experiences as well as broader cultural understandings of romantic relationships. Jiao et al. (2024) provide a particularly relevant contemporary review of romantic relationships and relationship attitudes among Asian emerging adults aged 18–29 [12]. Reviewing 41 studies, the authors identified parenting factors, culture-specific factors, and psychological factors as relevant to romantic relationship qualities and attitudes toward dating and marriage. Their review also highlighted the importance of parental approval and cultural expectations in shaping romantic attitudes among Asian emerging adults.

These findings are relevant to the present study because experiences of intimacy and autonomy do not develop solely within the romantic relationship itself. Individuals may bring expectations from their

families and wider social environments into their relationships. Beliefs about how much time partners should spend together, how frequently they should communicate, and what constitutes commitment may therefore be shaped by experiences and expectations extending beyond the couple.

Cultural expectations may be particularly relevant when individuals negotiate personal space. In contexts where closeness and togetherness are strongly associated with care, commitment, or relational security, spending time independently may be experienced differently than it would in contexts where greater individual independence is expected. Similarly, individuals may enter relationships with different assumptions about how much time partners should spend together and how much independence is appropriate within a committed partnership. Jiao et al. (2024) also highlighted the need for greater diversity in research on Asian emerging adults and for greater attention to cultural and social contexts [12]. Personal space can therefore be understood as an experience shaped by both immediate relationship dynamics and wider relational and cultural expectations. Exploring these influences may help explain why individuals can experience similar amounts of time apart in very different ways.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Thirteen participants aged between 20 and 25 years participated in the study. All participants were currently involved in committed heterosexual romantic relationships lasting between six months and five years. Participants maintained separate residences from their partners due to educational or developmental circumstances. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling using university networks, social media platforms, and word-of-mouth referrals. Both male and female participants were included, and all participants expressed willingness to reflect on their relational experiences.

3.2 Study Design

A qualitative research design was employed to explore participants' lived experiences of personal space within romantic relationships. The study was informed by a phenomenological orientation, with emphasis placed on how individuals interpreted and constructed meaning around their experiences. Data were analysed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework outlined by [13]. This approach enabled recurring patterns of meaning to be identified across participants' accounts while allowing for interpretive engagement with their individual experiences.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews. An interview guide was developed to explore participants' experiences of personal time, relational boundaries, communication with partners, and emotional responses to time spent apart.

Open-ended questions addressed the meaning of personal time within participants' relationships, how the need for personal space was communicated to partners, emotional responses to time apart, changes in the understanding of personal space over the course of the relationship, and the influence of family upbringing and cultural expectations on relational boundaries. Interviews lasted between 20 and 65 minutes and were conducted either in person or through online platforms. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.4 Procedure and Ethical Considerations

Participants were provided with an information sheet describing the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of participation. Written informed consent was obtained prior to interviews conducted in person, while verbal consent was sought from participants whose interviews were conducted online. Participants

were assured that their responses would remain confidential and that pseudonyms would be used during transcription and reporting. Interviews began with general rapport-building questions before progressing to discussions concerning personal space, relational expectations, and experiences of intimacy.

3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase analytic process [13]. Transcripts were initially read repeatedly to facilitate familiarity with the data. Meaningful segments of text were then coded systematically across the dataset, after which codes were grouped into potential themes based on conceptual similarities. Themes were subsequently reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and conceptual distinctiveness before being defined and named. The final analytic narrative was developed by integrating participants' accounts with relevant theoretical perspectives.

4. Results

The thematic analysis generated five interrelated themes illustrating how participants experienced and interpreted personal space within their romantic relationships. These themes reflect overlapping relational processes rather than discrete categories, demonstrating how autonomy and intimacy are negotiated through everyday interactions and personal meaning-making.

Table 1 : Summary of Themes, Conceptual Meaning, and Verbatim Extracts

Theme	Meaning of the Theme in the Study	Verbatim Extract
Autonomy and the Preservation of Individual Identity	Personal time functioned as emotional regulation and identity maintenance within intimacy.	"I need that time to reset. If I don't get it, I feel irritated and overwhelmed... but after being alone for a while, I can come back and be more present."
Negotiating Boundaries: Communication and Mutual Regulation	The impact of space depended on clear communication and mutual reassurance.	"It's not about wanting to be away from him. I just need to tell him I need some time. When he understands that, it doesn't become a fight."
Internalized Relational Expectations in Interpreting Personal Time	Reactions to personal time were shaped by attachment patterns and early relational experiences.	"Growing up, if someone wanted space, it meant something was wrong. So sometimes when my partner asks for space, I feel like it's a problem."
Developmental Reframing: Evolving Meanings of Personal Time	Meanings of space shifted over time as trust developed.	"In the beginning, I used to overthink it. Now I know it doesn't mean anything bad. We both just need our own time sometimes."
Intergenerational and Cultural Scripts of	Cultural and family norms influenced how autonomy was interpreted.	"In my family, we are always together. So taking time for myself sometimes feels selfish, even though I know it's not."

Closeness		
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5. Discussion

Participants frequently described personal time as a way of maintaining individual identity and regulating emotions. Time alone provided opportunities to recharge, engage in personal interests, and return to the relationship feeling more present. This aligns with Self-Determination Theory, which identifies autonomy and relatedness as fundamental psychological needs [3]. It also resonates with Bowen's (1978) concept of differentiation of self, which emphasises maintaining individuality while remaining emotionally connected [9]. Hadden et al. (2018) similarly found that relationship autonomy can coexist with constructive relationship-oriented responses, while Lampis et al. (2019) found associations between differentiation and couple functioning [4, 10]. The present findings add a qualitative perspective by illustrating how these processes may be experienced through everyday practices rather than explicitly understood in theoretical terms.

Communication was central to how participants negotiated personal space. Requests for time alone appeared easier to integrate into the relationship when they were communicated clearly and accompanied by mutual understanding or reassurance. This supports the view that autonomy is negotiated within relationships rather than existing solely as an individual preference. The finding is consistent with et al. (2018) and with Johnson's (2004) emphasis on emotional responsiveness within intimate relationships [4, 5]. The findings suggest that communicating individual needs while maintaining reassurance about the relationship may help partners accommodate autonomy without creating unnecessary uncertainty.

Participants' interpretations of personal space were also shaped by previous relational experiences and expectations. Some described initially interpreting a partner's need for space as a sign that something was wrong within the relationship. Attachment theory provides a framework for understanding how earlier relational experiences may influence expectations concerning closeness and security [7]. Zhang and Li (2021) similarly found that the relationship between solitude and marital satisfaction varied according to attachment-related characteristics and partner effects [8]. While their study examined married couples quantitatively, the present findings illustrate how participants themselves made meaning of time apart, showing that personal space may carry different meanings depending on the expectations individuals bring to their relationships.

The meaning of personal space also appeared to change as relationships developed. Participants described greater uncertainty around time apart during earlier stages of some relationships, followed by increased acceptance as trust and familiarity developed. This can be considered alongside research on emerging adult romantic relationships, which highlights variation in intimacy, commitment, and relationship experiences during this developmental period [11]. Participants' accounts suggest that repeated experiences of communication, consistency, and reassurance may allow personal space to become a more familiar and accepted part of the relationship.

Finally, participants described familial and cultural expectations as influencing their understanding of closeness and individual time. Some experienced discomfort or guilt around taking time for themselves when they had grown up in environments where togetherness was strongly associated with care and commitment. This is consistent with Jiao et al. (2024), who highlight the influence of parenting and cultural factors on romantic attitudes among Asian emerging adults [12]. It also complements research

examining how social expectations shape relationship structures and cohabitation [1]. These findings suggest that negotiating personal space can involve reconciling individual preferences with understandings of intimacy developed within wider familial and cultural contexts.

Taken together, the findings suggest that personal space is shaped by more than the amount of time partners spend apart. Its meaning is influenced by individual needs, communication, relational history, developing trust, and wider social expectations. Personal space can therefore form part of how individuals maintain a sense of self while remaining connected within a committed relationship.

6. Limitations

The findings should be considered in light of several limitations. First, the qualitative design and relatively small sample of 13 participants prioritised depth of understanding rather than statistical generalisability. The findings therefore provide insight into participants' experiences rather than representing young adults or romantic relationships more broadly.

Second, data were collected from individuals rather than couples. The findings consequently reflect participants' subjective accounts and do not capture partners' perspectives or the interactional processes through which personal space may be jointly negotiated. Future research could incorporate couple-based interviews or dyadic methods to explore how partners understand and negotiate personal space together.

Third, the sample consisted entirely of young adults aged between 20 and 25 years who were in committed heterosexual relationships and maintained separate residences. Experiences of personal space may differ across age groups, sexual orientations, relationship durations, living arrangements, and cultural contexts. The specificity of the sample should therefore be considered when interpreting the transferability of the findings. Finally, the interviews relied on participants' accounts of their experiences, which may have been influenced by memory and participants' current interpretations of their relationships.

7. Implications of the Study

The findings have potential implications for relationship research and couple-focused psychological practice. Clinically, requests for personal space may benefit from being explored in terms of the meaning attached to them rather than being interpreted automatically as signs of relational dissatisfaction or emotional withdrawal.

For couples experiencing tension around time apart, therapeutic work may involve exploring the expectations and previous experiences that influence how requests for space are interpreted, while also developing clearer ways of communicating individual needs and providing relational reassurance. The findings also highlight the relevance of autonomy and individuality within couple work, consistent with perspectives emphasising autonomy, relatedness, and differentiation [3,9].

From a relationship-science perspective, the findings also highlight the importance of considering relationship structures beyond cohabiting or married partnerships. Participants maintained separate residences while describing committed romantic relationships, suggesting that physical proximity alone may not fully capture how intimacy and commitment are experienced.

The findings may also be relevant to understanding romantic relationships during emerging adulthood, where individuals may simultaneously negotiate developing identities, independence, family expectations, and intimate relationships. Further research could examine how these processes differ across relationship structures, developmental stages, and cultural contexts.

8. Conclusion

The present study explored how young adults in committed, non-cohabiting romantic relationships experienced and made meaning of personal space. Across the five themes, personal time was associated with emotional regulation, individual identity, communication, developing trust, and wider relational and cultural expectations.

Personal space was therefore experienced as more than simply time spent away from a partner. Participants' accounts suggest that it can form part of the ongoing negotiation between individual needs and relational connection. When communicated and understood within the relationship, personal time could coexist with emotional closeness while allowing individuals to maintain aspects of their identity outside the partnership.

These findings contribute a qualitative perspective to research on autonomy, intimacy, differentiation, and contemporary romantic relationships, while highlighting the value of understanding personal space from the perspective of individuals experiencing it within their relationships. Further qualitative and dyadic research could build on these findings by examining how personal space is negotiated between partners and how these experiences vary across different relationship and cultural contexts.

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