

Couples at Home: Affective Spaces, Happy Objects and the Materiality of Intimacy

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Topic

My project took **love and intimate relationships** in (hetero- and homosexual) couples as a starting point for empirical inquiries, lending from Hartmut Rosa's theory the idea of love and the private sphere as a 'resonance haven'. I specifically addressed this topic with a **class-sensitive approach** when researching empirically romantic rituals of couples who have a low formal education and relatively small incomes. Moreover, the aim was to shed light on the **material side of intimacy**, as the majority of theoretical approaches on intimacy focus on verbal communication as a means to establish intimacy.



Research Questions

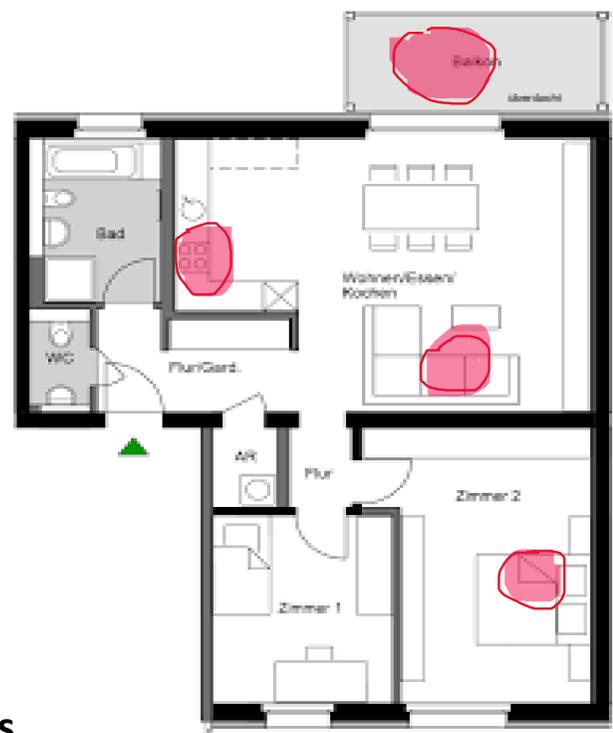
- What kind of (**romantic**) rituals and other practices serve as means for intimacy-building for the researched couples?
- What role does **materiality** (bodies, objects, spatial arrangement, ...) play in those practices and how can this dimensions be empirically grasped?

Aims

- Widening the research on **couples** with a project specifically aimed at a vastly **under-researched** segment
- Critically engaging with the interrelation with class and scientific practices, analyzing how theoretical approaches **on love, intimacy and romance** are often **shaped by a class bias**, prioritizing middle class practices and emotional cultures
- **Enriching the concept of resonance** through empirical findings concerning the importance of **affectivity and materiality** in the establishment and the reproduction of (intensely affective) social bonds but also concerning experiences of alienation

Methods

- Data-collection through **narrative interviews** in combination with ethnographically inspired **Walking Interviews**, as joint explorations of the domestic space of the couples
- **Sample: 12 couples** in total (sampling criteria: cohabitation and a formal education lower than the German Abitur) with an average length of 5 hours. One case out of the 12 served for contrastation, having significantly higher educational degrees and incomes
- Data-analysis was oriented by **Dokumentarische Methode**



Results

- Developing a **new concept for analyzing the material dimension of intimacy** (object-related, situated, embodied, spatial) that doesn't only rely on dyadic and verbal communication but on **shared affective orientation towards a third**. In the analysis, these optimistic attachments are analyzed as *Happy Objects*.
- Empirically, the analysis of *Happy Objects* is the core of my results, showing very clearly that there are **functional equivalents to verbal communication** in practices of intimacy-building. These *Happy Objects* are often centered around ideas of **reproduction, routine and normalcy** – countering hegemonic concepts of intimacy characteristic for the middle classes.
- Empirical results also hint at how **affectivity, intimacy and gender** interrelate: Firstly, the material showed how (gendered) **power relations** are inscribed into the domestic space and the configuration of objects. Secondly a share of women deemed themselves depressive – which is giving insights on **pathologies of intimacy** as numbness and **indifference**.

Reference and Sources:
Ahmed, Sara (2010): Happy Objects. In: Gregg, Melissa/Seigworth, Gregory J. (Hg.): The Affect Theory Reader. Durham and London: Duke University Press. S. 29-51.
Left: Ostsee-Zeitung online: <https://bit.ly/2DAIEZw>
Right: Sparkasse: Renovieren, Sanieren, Modernisieren. <https://bit.ly/324mcAa>

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