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Intentions to move, residential preferences and mobility behaviour: a longitudinal perspective

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1 Introduction

*A fox of Gascon, though some say of Norman descent,
When starved till faint gazed up at a trellis to which
grapes were tied –
Matured till they glowed with a purplish tint
As though there were gems inside.
Now grapes were what our adventurer on strained
haunches chanced to crave,*

*But because he could not reach the vine
He said, "These grapes are sour; I'll leave them for some
knave."
Better, I think, than an embittered whine.*

[La Fontaine's "The Fox and the Grapes"
translated by Moore, 1954]

1.1 Background

Individuals' residential mobility behaviour and housing choices shape the demographic and socioeconomic composition of residential locations (cf. Cadwallader, 1992). Because different groups of individuals make different residential choices, individuals contribute to processes at the aggregate level, such as the segregation of low-income households and gentrification. A major issue of debate is whether such processes are attributable to differences in residential preferences or to restrictions and constraints on moving, whereby some individuals are able to move freely while others must settle for a home or residential location that does not match their residential preferences. Therefore, it is important to understand how the stage in the life course careers and the contextual circumstances facilitate the realisation of mobility intentions and residential preferences, and the circumstances in which intended movers remain in their current home or move to a home or residential location other than those they initially preferred.

The residential mobility behaviour of individuals is often analysed as a discrete event in which the actual mobility outcome is considered to reflect residential preferences (Timmermans et al., 1994). However, if residential mobility is viewed as a process that starts with the formation of a positive attitude towards moving that may or may not result in a change of residence, then it is insufficient to focus solely on the mobility outcome. As Goldstein (1976) put it, "Can you imagine, too, undertaking a comprehensive study of fertility without giving any attention to those couples who have decided to remain childless or those couples who have decided to halt their fertility?" (p. 427). By focussing solely on the mobility outcome, one ignores the many people who may be willing to move but are unable to do so (Feijten & Van Ham, 2009) and that people's residential choices may differ from their initial preferences due to hampering factors, suggesting a risk of confusing preferences with restrictions and constraints (Cadwallader, 1992).

Longitudinal studies investigating the individual mobility decision-making process reveal a gap between attitudes towards moving and actual mobility behaviour. A positive attitude towards moving (a desire, thought, intention, or expectation) often fails to result in a change of residence, and some people move despite having no initial desire or intention to do so (for example, see Duncan & Newman, 1976; Landale & Guest, 1985; Lu, 1999; Rossi, 1955; Speare, 1974). In other words, there are literal behavioural inconsistencies between the initial attitude and the final outcome that are both dealing with the same specific behaviour (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010; see also Gardner et al., 1985).

Previous research has focussed on what makes people change residences following a positive attitude towards moving. The question of what makes people move “unexpectedly” has received less attention. Several researchers have tested the validity of Speare’s assertion (1974) that background characteristics (indicated by the stage in the various life course careers) have little effect on actual mobility because their effect is mediated by residential satisfaction, which triggers the desire or intention to move (e.g., Bach & Smith, 1977; Landale & Guest, 1985; Lu, 1998; Newman & Duncan, 1979). Most research has shown that sociodemographic, socioeconomic, and housing circumstances directly affect the relationship between positive attitudes towards moving and mobility behaviour. For instance, renters, whites, and young adults are more likely to realise positive attitudes towards moving than homeowners, blacks, and older adults are (for example, see Duncan & Newman, 1976; Kan, 1999; Lu, 1999). Kearns and Parkes (2003) found that, after controlling for mobility intentions, people living in inner city estates and deprived areas in London were significantly less likely to move than those living in other areas of England.

With its strong focus on current life course statuses, previous research tends to neglect the fact that household, occupational, and housing changes may also affect the extent to which positive attitudes towards moving are realised. Anticipated changes, such as union formation, are often only linked to the formation of positive attitudes towards moving (for example, see Kley, 2010); they are seen as triggers for moving. However, anticipated changes may also directly influence the extent to which positive attitudes towards moving are realised because some anticipated changes or triggers for moving are more urgent than others (Goetgeluk, 1997). Conversely, unanticipated household and labour changes are often mentioned as reasons why people do not behave according to their initial attitude towards moving (Hooimeijer & Oskamp, 1996; Speare, 1974). However, empirical evidence about how unanticipated changes affect the initial attitude towards moving is scarce.

Likewise, little is known about the role of residential preferences in the realisation of a positive attitude towards moving. Residential preferences indicate intended movers’ preferences regarding the home and search location. These preferences and the willingness to adjust these residential preferences are crucial for the opportunities that intended movers have to change residence. If intended movers face difficulties in moving to a home that matches their residential preferences, they may make a diverging residential choice: they may either stay in their current home or move to a home or residential location other than those they initially preferred. Surprisingly, this last substitution mechanism has rarely been investigated by housing researchers.

The aim of this study is to shed light on behavioural inconsistencies within the individual mobility decision-making process through a longitudinal investigation of actual residential behaviour (a term covering both mobility behaviour and housing choice) conditional on mobility intentions and residential preferences. This study's main research question is as follows: *How do anticipated and unanticipated changes in the life course and residential preferences affect the discrepancy between stated mobility intentions and actual mobility behaviour, and what makes intended movers realise or substitute their initial residential preferences?*

1.2 The residential mobility decision-making process

Since Rossi's seminal study, *Why Families Move* (1955), many researchers have investigated the residential mobility behaviour of individuals from a behavioural orientated approach. This approach distinguishes several stages in the mobility decision-making process, including the formation of a positive attitude towards moving, the search and evaluation of the housing alternatives, and, finally, the decision to move or to stay (Brown & Moore, 1971; Cadwallader, 1992; De Jong, 1999; Hooimeijer & Oskamp, 1996). Research has particularly focussed on the extent to which positive attitudes toward moving are realised (for example, see Kan, 1999; Landale & Guest, 1985; Lu, 1998; Rossi, 1955; Speare, 1974). This focus is understandable because the intention-behaviour gap is fundamental to understanding the mobility decision-making process underlying potential moves (De Jong, 1999).

Triggers for moving, intentions to move, and residential preferences

The mobility decision-making process begins with a trigger setting off a positive attitude towards moving. A positive attitude can be triggered by stimuli such as dissatisfaction with the current home or residential location and the wish to change this dissatisfactory situation (Rossi, 1955; Speare, 1974), and life events in the household, educational, or occupational career such as union dissolution and job change (Mulder & Hooimeijer, 1999). The triggers for moving indicate the goals that people try to achieve with the change of residence; changing residence is never a goal in itself (Mulder, 1993). For instance, people may intend to move to reduce their commuting time to work or to begin cohabiting. Note that triggers for involuntary moving, such as impending housing demolition, are beyond the scope of this thesis.

A positive attitude towards moving may refer to a desire, thought, intention, plan, or expectation towards moving. There are important conceptual

differences between these various positive attitudes in their degree of conviction, commitment, and certainty to perform the behaviour. An intention to move indicates that one is willing to change residence (De Jong, 1999) and is therefore associated with a higher degree of conviction and commitment than a desire or thought (see also Lee et al., 1994). Expectations also reflect a perceived “certainty”, namely, whether individuals think that the behaviour is likely to happen in the future (Sheeran, 2002). Neither intentions nor expectations necessarily entail a desire; they can be motivated by obligation or necessity instead (Davis, 1984; McHugh, 1984).

The various positive attitudes towards moving also differ in the extent to which they are accounted for perceived or anticipated factors of which individuals believe that they may hamper the change of residence, such as insufficient income, at the individual level, and a tight housing market, at the contextual level. A desire is often seen as an unconstrained attitude, that is, an attitude that is not adjusted for anticipated hampering factors (Crowder, 2001; Desbarats, 1983; Lu, 1998). Conversely, in line with Ajzen’s theory of planned behaviour (1991), intentions and expectations are thought to incorporate an individual’s perception of restrictions and constraints that might hamper the change of residence (Ajzen, 1991; see also Gollwitzer, 1993; Lu, 1998). Note that this thesis focuses on intentions to move voluntarily, which solely indicates the willingness to change residence.

If individuals expect hindrances in the form of insufficient financial resources or a tight housing market (and assuming that people try to avoid striving for something that is unlikely to happen), a latent favourable attitude towards moving may not crystallise into a manifest intention or expectation (Gardner et al., 1985; Gollwitzer, 1993). In the social psychology literature, this phenomenon is known as “adaptive preference formation”. To reduce cognitive dissonance (uncomfortable feelings caused by preferring something that is difficult to attain) people may adjust their preferences or attitudes in advance (Elster, 1983). Thus, people who have an intention to move presumably believe that it might be possible to overcome the perceived difficulties that they may encounter if they were to move (Gardner et al., 1985).

Financial resources and the perceived circumstances of the regional housing market may also affect the formation of residential preferences, such as the preference for homeownership (Forrest et al., 1990; McLaverty & Yip, 1993) or a certain residential location (Feijten et al., 2008). Individuals are expected to include an immeasurable amount of information (subjective and objective) about housing market circumstances in the formation of their residential preferences (Hooimeijer & Oskamp, 2000). As with latent favourable attitudes towards

moving, a latent residential preference may not crystallise into a manifest preference if people believe that anticipated hampering factors cannot be overcome.

Actual mobility behaviour and housing choice

It is assumed that people only (intend to) change residence when the benefits of moving surpass the costs (for example, see De Jong, 1999; Mulder & Hooimeijer, 1999). Yet, moving is not free from restrictions and constraints. People may face difficulties in finding a home suiting their residential preferences and budget. Instead of realising their positive attitude towards moving, they may decide to stay in their current home (Brown & Moore, 1970) or to move to a home or location different from their initial residential preference. The latter is referred to as substitution: the acceptance of a new home that may fit some, but not all, of one's initial residential preferences (Goetgeluk, 1997).

The extent to which people realise their positive attitude towards moving depends on whether they have a desire, intention, or expectation to move. Intentions and, especially, expectations possess greater predictive validity than desires and thoughts because they are associated with a higher degree of conviction and commitment to perform the behaviour (cf. Lee et al., 2004). Indeed, several studies have shown that expectations and plans to move are more closely related to actual mobility behaviour than desires and considerations to move (Coulter et al., 2010; Kley, 2010; Rossi, 1955).

Although perceived hampering factors are presumably already incorporated into the intention to move, hampering factors may affect the extent to which intentions to move are realised. First, the actual hampering factors may be more severe than anticipated. This especially holds for contextual circumstances that are beyond a person's control, such as the regional housing market situation. Second, people presumably imperfectly adjust their attitudes towards moving. Even if people believe that it is difficult to change residence due to anticipated hampering factors, they may still be willing to move, which might indicate the adaption of "wishful thinking" (Elster, 1983). Note that the impact of hampering factors, such as insufficient financial resources, on actual mobility behaviour presumably depends on the positive attitude under study. Because intentions are seen as constrained attitudes, hampering factors may have weaker effects on the realisation of mobility intentions than on the realisation of mobility desires.

An important question here is whether anticipated triggers for moving also affect the extent to which intentions to move are realised. Anticipated triggers, such as dissatisfaction and life course events, are often only considered relevant to the formation of positive attitudes towards moving (for example, see Mulder &

Hooimeijer, 1999; Speare, 1974). Although Kley (2010) argues that anticipated life course events do not directly influence the last stage of the mobility process, there is reason to believe that this assumption does not hold. The trigger for moving indicates the consequences of not realising the intended move and thus the necessity of realising it (compare Gollwitzer, 1993). Intended moves triggered by changes in the life course are associated with a high degree of necessity because not moving may require postponing the life course change (Goetgeluk, 1997; Oskamp, 1997). Compared to household and employment reasons for moving, housing reasons for moving are considered less urgent because not moving or delaying the move only extends the suboptimal housing situation (Goetgeluk, 1997). Thus, triggers for moving are relevant to the level of commitment to executing the intended action (Gollwitzer, 1993), that is, how much of an effort people are willing to exert to perform the behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). Generally, the stronger the intention to engage in behaviour, the more likely it is that the intended behaviour will be performed (Ajzen, 1991).

Several authors argue that the extent to which people behave according to their initial attitude towards moving is influenced by unanticipated changes in the life course (for example, see Hooimeijer & Oskamp, 1996; Speare, 1974). Unanticipated changes only differ from anticipated changes in their unexpectedness; they were not taken into account in the mental “calculus” and hence they may affect the intention–behaviour relation (Gardner et al., 1985; see also Anderson et al., 1986). For those without an initial intention to move, unanticipated life events may cause an unexpected trigger for moving and a subsequent move within a short time. Conversely, among those already intending to move, unanticipated life events may lead to the postponement or cancellation of the intended move. With the notable exception of Kan’s (1999) study, large-scale research on the role of unanticipated changes in the discrepancy between stated attitudes towards moving and actual mobility behaviour is scarce.

Finally, individuals’ residential preferences – regarding the type of dwelling and (type of) residential location – are relevant to their housing market opportunities to change residence. For instance, preferences concerning geographical location may play a role because of large regional differences in housing market opportunities (Clark & Dieleman, 1996). People who prefer a home in the densely populated Randstad region, which is characterised by a relatively tight housing market, presumably have fewer housing opportunities than people who prefer a home in the national periphery. If people are unable to find a home that suits their residential preferences, they may decide to stay in their current home or move to a home or a location other than those they initially

preferred. Whether this is the case likely depends on the rigidity of the residential preference, which, in turn, is related to personal characteristics such as the stage in the various life course careers (Goetgeluk, 1997; Goetgeluk & Hooimeijer, 1991). Surprisingly, previous research has paid little attention to the role of residential preferences in the discrepancy between positive attitudes towards moving and mobility behaviour, let alone to the realisation or adjustments of residential preferences.

1.3 Research approach and thesis outline

For the purpose of this thesis, a longitudinal data set was created in which survey data from the large-scale cross-sectional Housing Demand Surveys (HDS) 1998 and 2002 and their successor, the Housing Research Netherlands (HRN) 2006 survey were enriched with individual register data from the longitudinal Social Statistical Database (SSD) of Statistics Netherlands (Bakker, 2002; Houbiers, 2004). While the housing surveys provide information on the respondents' intention to move within two years and their residential preferences, information from the SSD is used to derive the same respondents' actual moves, housing choices, and life course events in the two years after the survey.

This thesis consists of five complementary studies that are described in the following five chapters. The studies each address a different research question and objective, and together they provide the basis to answer the main research question. Each study is written as an individual research paper and can be read separately from the rest. All the studies have been published in or submitted to an international peer-reviewed scientific journal, with the exception of the study described in Chapter 2, which has been published as a chapter of a book.

Chapter 2 investigates how longitudinal and cross-sectional approaches may lead to different conclusions regarding the discrepancy between mobility intentions and mobility behaviour. The aim of the chapter is to show the value of the longitudinal approach to gain insight into individual mobility decision-making processes. A longitudinal research method is applied to answer the following research question using a binomial logistic regression model: *To what extent do reasons for moving, housing dissatisfaction, and housing preferences hamper or stimulate the actual mobility behaviour of those intending to move to another dwelling?*

Chapter 3 concentrates on the impact of anticipated or preferred changes in the household and housing career that may act as triggers for moving, such as union formation and the desire to move out of homeownership, on the

realisation of intentions to move. Special attention is given to the strength of the intention to move. Binomial logistic regression models are used to answer the following research question: *To what extent do anticipated triggers for moving, the strength of the intention to move, resources and restrictions, and the preferred search location play a role in the realisation of an intention to move?*

Chapter 4 investigates how unanticipated changes in the household and occupational career contribute to the discrepancy between initial intentions to move or to stay and actual mobility behaviour. Binomial logistic regression analyses of person-years are employed to investigate how unanticipated life events may lead people to change or adjust their initial attitude towards moving. The chapter aims to demonstrate that unanticipated life events may cause an unexpected need to move among people who initially did not intend to change residence and that they may increase the urgency of previously reported intentions to move or may lead to the postponement or cancellation of intentions to move.

In Chapters 5 and 6, the focus shifts from the realisation of mobility intentions to the realisation and adjustments of residential preferences. Chapter 5 examines the formation of the preference to move into homeownership and the actual residential behaviour of aspiring homeowners. The chapter aims to identify the extent to which factors hamper or stimulate the transition to homeownership at various stages. Special attention is given to the role of regional housing market circumstances. This chapter addresses the following research question: *To what extent do individual characteristics and contextual circumstances influence the formation and realisation of preferences to move into homeownership and in which of these two stages do the various determinants have the largest impact?* Binomial and multinomial logistic regression analyses are employed to answer the research question.

Chapter 6 attempts to illuminate one of the most pressing topics in the rural mobility literature: do rural residents face difficulties in finding a home within their locality, and are they forced to move elsewhere due to the influx of more wealthy newcomers? Using a multilevel multinomial logistic regression model, this chapter addresses the following research question: *Do intended local movers realise their rural location preference (i.e., their preference to move to a rural area within their current municipality) less often than intended non-local movers, and to what extent do income and the local housing market pressure influence the realisation or substitution of rural location preferences?* The chapter also examines whether rural residents are more inclined to express a preference to leave their municipality if the local housing market pressure is high.

The study concludes with Chapter 7. In this chapter, the complementary research findings of the previous chapters are combined to answer the main research question: *How do anticipated and unanticipated changes in the life course and residential preferences affect the discrepancy between stated mobility intentions and actual mobility behaviour, and what makes intended movers realise or substitute their initial residential preferences?* This chapter also discusses the value and limitations of the chosen longitudinal research approach.

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