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

de Groot, C.

Publication date

2011

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

de Groot, C. (2011). *Intentions to move, residential preferences and mobility behaviour: a longitudinal perspective*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

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7.1 Introduction

This thesis is about the discrepancy between stated intentions to move and actual mobility behaviour. Numerous studies have demonstrated that people often do not behave according to their prior stated attitude towards moving. Many people with a positive attitude towards moving (e.g., a desire, thought, intention, or expectation) do not change residence, while some of those who initially intend to remain in their current home move nonetheless. In other words, there are literal behavioural inconsistencies between the initial attitude and the actual outcome that are both dealing with the same specific behaviour (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010; see also Gardner et al., 1985). Behavioural inconsistencies are found not only in intended mobility behaviour but also in other intended behaviours such as voting (Bassili, 1995), healthy eating (Jackson et al., 2005), leisure-time exercise (Godin et al., 1987), charitable giving (Smith & McSweeney, 2007), and academic achievement (Manstead & Van Eekelen, 1998).

The aim of this study was to explore how life course characteristics and changes, residential preferences, and contextual circumstances contribute to the discrepancy between stated mobility intentions and actual mobility behaviour in the Netherlands. An intention to move indicates the willingness to change residence. The main research question was 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?*

To answer the main research question, five complementary studies were performed. All studies applied a longitudinal approach in which individuals were followed for two years to determine how their initial attitude towards moving and their residential preferences matched their actual residential behaviour (a term covering both mobility behaviour and actual housing choice). Chapters 2 and 3 addressed the role of anticipated triggers for moving, the strength or urgency of the intention to move, and residential preferences in the realisation of the intention to move. Chapter 4 demonstrated how unanticipated life events might lead to changes or adjustments in the initial attitude towards moving and hence to behavioural inconsistencies. In Chapters 5 and 6, the focus shifted to residential preferences. Chapter 5 examined the formation of preferences to move into homeownership and the actual residential behaviour of aspiring homeowners. Chapter 6 documented the realisation of rural location preferences. In the remainder of the present chapter, the results of the five complementary studies are summarised to answer the main research question. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the research findings and the value of the longitudinal

approach for the investigation of behavioural inconsistencies in the individual mobility decision-making process.

7.2 Behavioural inconsistencies in the residential mobility decision-making process

This thesis has identified a number of inconsistencies between initial mobility intentions and actual mobility behaviour, a finding that is consistent with other longitudinal studies investigating mobility outcomes conditional on initial attitudes towards moving (e.g., Kan, 1999; Lu, 1998; Rossi, 1955). First, the vast majority of those who intended to move within two years (approximately two-thirds) did not move within this period and may have postponed or discarded their initial intention to move. A second behavioural inconsistency arises among people who initially intended to stay in their current home: a small proportion of them moved nonetheless. Some of these movers may have developed an intention to move after the interview and subsequently succeeded in realising this intention, but other unexpected moves might have been triggered by less voluntary reasons for moving, such as forced housing eviction. Third, because so many intended movers stayed in their current homes, many of them did not realise their residential preferences. Some intended movers who did change residence also made a housing choice that did not reflect their initial residential preference. For instance, Chapter 5 showed that of the people who preferred to move into homeownership, approximately 56 per cent did not move, 13 per cent moved to a rental home, and only one-third realised their preference to move into homeownership within two years. Adjustment mechanisms also apply to the realisation of rural location preferences, as demonstrated in Chapter 6. Of the intended movers who preferred rural housing in a specific municipality, less than 37 per cent actually changed residence. Among them, 30 per cent moved to an urban area, 14 per cent moved to a rural area in a different municipality, and approximately 56 per cent moved to a rural area in the preferred municipality.

This thesis has shown that the necessity of moving, indicated by the strength or the urgency of the mobility intention, strongly affects whether intended movers actually change residence. A low necessity to execute the intended move is associated with a lower likelihood of realising an intention to move. Whereas approximately 20 per cent of those with a less strong mobility intention changed residence within two years, almost 50 per cent of those with a strong mobility intention did so (Chapter 3). The necessity of executing the intended move proved to be the single most important determinant of whether intended movers actually changed residence.

This thesis has also shown that intended movers' sociodemographic, socioeconomic, and housing characteristics directly affect the relationship between attitudes towards moving and actual mobility behaviour. Consequently, certain individuals act less in accordance with their initial mobility intentions than others. Chapter 4 revealed that single people and people with a non-Western background were less likely to move if they intended to do so, but they were more likely to move "unexpectedly" than stable couples and native Dutch were. These differences were not attributable to differences in age, financial resources, or residential preferences. Furthermore, Chapter 2 showed that people who intended to move from one independent housing situation to another (intended filterers) moved less frequently than people who intended to move to their first independent home (intended starters). Likewise, older adults were less likely to realise an intention to move than younger adults were. These last two findings may indicate that people become more selective regarding their future home and less willing to adjust their residential preferences after they have progressed in their housing career. They may be more willing to postpone or discard their intention to move than to accept a home that does not meet their initial residential preferences.

7.3 Anticipated and unanticipated life course changes

Decades of research have documented a close relationship between life events in the household and occupational career and residential mobility behaviour (e.g., Clark et al., 1994; Feijten, 2005; Mulder, 1993; Rossi, 1955). Together with residential dissatisfaction, life course events are important triggers for a positive attitude towards moving, which may lead to a change of residence. Chapters 2 and 3 argued that anticipated triggers for moving, such as the formation of a co-residential union or the wish to move to a larger home, may directly influence the last stage of the mobility process. Anticipated triggers for moving indicate the consequences of not realising an intended move. The more far-reaching these consequences are, the more committed intended movers will be to realising the intended move and the more likely it is that intended movers will actually change residence.

Indeed, Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrated that the extent to which people realise their intention to move is related to the desire to accomplish something in a particular life course trajectory by changing residence, either indicated by the main reason for moving (Chapter 2) or by anticipated and preferred changes in the household and housing career (Chapter 3). In line with the idea that union formation and union dissolution are associated with a high perceived necessity

of moving, Chapter 2 showed that people who intended to move for demographic reasons were more likely to change residence than those who intended to move for housing reasons, such as the preference for a garden or a larger house. The failure to realise an intended move triggered by housing reasons extends the suboptimal housing situation, which is unquestionably less severe than the failure to realise an intended move triggered by the anticipated formation or dissolution of a co-residential union. Furthermore, Chapter 3 showed that singles who expected to form a multi-person household after an intended move were more likely to move than stable singles, which supports the idea that intended moves prompted by a household change are more necessary than intended moves of stable households. In line with the thought that homeowners usually do not move out of the owner-occupied housing sector unless there is an urgent need to do so, people who preferred to move out of homeownership had a particularly high probability of realising their intention to move. Finally, Chapter 2 revealed that dissatisfaction with the home provides an extra stimulus for realising an intention to move. In sum, it appears that the realisation of intentions to move is determined not only by the stage in the various life course careers, as has been shown in previous research, but also by anticipated and preferred changes in these careers. Thus, such changes are relevant for the formation of intentions to move and for the extent to which people realise their intention to move.

Whereas Chapter 3 examined whether anticipated changes provide an additional stimulus for realising the intention to move, Chapter 4 argued that unanticipated changes in the household and occupational career might lead to changes or adjustments in the initial attitude towards moving. Unanticipated life events are not considered in the “mental calculus” of the initial intention to move or to stay and may therefore lead to potential behavioural inconsistencies in the individual mobility decision-making process.

Strong evidence is found that unanticipated changes in the household and occupational career may cause an unexpected need to move, which may result in “unexpected” moves. The formation and dissolution of a co-residential union, childbirth, job change, and losing a job all increased the likelihood of moving among those who initially had no intention to change residence. People who did not intend to move before they experienced the dissolution of a union were estimated to be 16 times more likely to move in the year the union dissolves than stable singles were. This outcome is not surprising because moves are instrumental to these household events. It should be noted that no information was available on anticipated household changes for people without an intention to move. The life events may therefore not have been unanticipated at the time of

interview. However, because these events are known to be important triggers for an intention to move and because such an intention was initially lacking, it is likely that these events were unanticipated at the moment of interview.

Furthermore, union dissolution, union formation, and childbirth led to a higher likelihood of moving among those who already intended to move for reasons other than household or job changes, such as housing and education. This suggests that unanticipated life course events may increase the urgency of previously reported intentions to move, resulting in an extra stimulus to move within a short period.

No support was found for the hypothesis that certain unanticipated life events may also result in postponement or cancellation of the intended move. Even though becoming a widow(er) or the loss of a job may negatively affect people's financial resources for a new home, becoming unemployed or a widow(er) had no significant effect on the probability of moving among those who already intended to move. Perhaps this finding can be traced back to the system of private insurances and social security benefits in the Netherlands. Unemployment benefits, widow(er) pensions, benefits from life assurances (particularly for homeowners), and a rise in housing benefits (for renters) may partly offset income decline following widowhood and unemployment, particularly in the short term (see also Feijten, 2005).

7.4 Housing policy context, socioeconomic resources, and residential preferences

The individual mobility decision-making process cannot be separated from the context in which residential choices are made. The context determines the housing market opportunities for people to move to a home that suits their residential preferences. In the Netherlands, housing market opportunities are shaped by not only the tension between housing demand and housing supply (an issue that will be discussed in greater detail in Section 7.5) but also by a longstanding tradition of government intervention. For individuals, this intervention is noticeable in regulated rents, housing allowances, and allocation rules for social rental housing, which makes up approximately three-quarters of the rental housing sector. In the owner-occupied housing sector, a sector that has grown into the largest housing market sector, the intervention is marked by tax savings in the form of fully deductible paid mortgage interest on taxable income (Haffner & Boumeester, 2010; Mulder, 2004; Rouwendal, 2007). The “pleasures” and “pains” of government intervention are closely interwoven with individuals' socioeconomic situation. For instance, a high household income precludes households from entering large parts of the rental sector. Whereas lower income

households particularly benefit from housing allowances in the social rental sector, higher income households benefit the most from the full deductibility of paid mortgage interest on taxable income due to their higher marginal tax rate (Haffner & Boumeester, 2010; Mulder, 2004; Rouwendal, 2007).

The relevance of the context became clear when investigating the role of housing tenure preferences in the realisation of people's intention to move. Chapters 2 and 3 showed that renters who preferred to move within the rental housing sector had the lowest probability of moving, a finding that presumably reflects the barriers to moving within the social rental housing sector, such as waiting lists and allocation rules. Irrespective of their residential preferences, homeowners were more likely to realise a strong intention to move than renters who preferred to move in the rental sector of the housing market (Chapter 3).

Theoretically, a favourable socioeconomic situation widens the range of dwellings – at least in the owner-occupied housing sector – that are within the financial reach of the intended mover. Does this mean that people with higher income are more likely to realise their intention to move than are people with low income? The findings of these chapters indicate that the answer to this question goes beyond a simple “yes” or “no”. Chapter 4 showed that high income facilitates the realisation of intended moves as well as “unexpected” moves. Chapter 3 demonstrated that people with high income were more likely to realise a strong intention to move than people with low income. These findings suggest that people with higher income have more opportunities to move shortly after forming an intention to move than people with a low income. Lower-income households often rely on the social rental housing sector, which may make their mobility behaviour subject to external factors, such as allocation rules and waiting lists for rental dwellings, more than to personal income.

However, Chapter 2 and, to a lesser extent, Chapter 3 did not show strong evidence that people with high income are more likely to realise an intention to move than are people with low income. In contrast to Chapter 4, in these chapters, the probability of realising an intention was also accounted for the strength of the mobility intention and for residential preferences (hence, for the fact that people with high income may search in different segments of the housing market). The absence of a significant income effect in the first two empirical chapters of this thesis lends support to the thought that while a high income expands the range of financially affordable dwellings, it does not necessarily expand the range of dwellings matching residential preferences. Another explanation for why income barely affected the realisation of intentions to move in Chapters 2 and 3 (which does not explain, however, why income was found to facilitate actual mobility behaviour in Chapter 4) might be that people

tend to consider their socioeconomic resources in the formation of both mobility intentions (De Groot et al., 2008) and residential preferences (an issue that will be pursued below). People who believe that they are unable to move to a home that suits their residential preferences due to insufficient financial resources may not form an intention to move in the first place, a phenomenon that is known as “adaptive preference formation” (Elster, 1983).

Whereas the effect of income on the realisation of intentions to move is not conclusive, socioeconomic resources did affect the extent to which intended movers realise their residential preferences when they change residence. Whereas Chapter 6 revealed that high income facilitates the realisation of rural location preferences, Chapter 5 demonstrated that aspiring homeowners in a more favourable socioeconomic position – indicated by high income and a full-time job – had the highest likelihood of moving into homeownership. Aspiring homeowners in more favourable socioeconomic positions were also less likely to move to a rental home than those with fewer socioeconomic resources. This finding corresponds with the idea that particularly affluent people benefit financially from becoming homeowners and often do not have access to large parts of the rental housing sector. Another finding worth noting is that people tended to adjust their tenure preferences to their socioeconomic resources (Chapter 5). Socioeconomic resources had an even stronger impact on the formation of preferences to move into homeownership than on the realisation of these preferences. This last finding might be attributable to the fact that people had already considered their socioeconomic resources in the formation of their tenure preferences.

7.5 Location as a source of opportunities, constraints, and residential ties

Housing market circumstances determine people’s opportunities to realise an intention to move. High housing market pressure is reflected in high housing prices and long waiting lists for social rental housing and is associated with a greater difficulty in finding a suitable and affordable home. Regions and areas (or neighbourhoods) within municipalities differ in their pressure on the housing market. Thus, different regions and areas offer different opportunities to realise intentions to move and residential preferences. In particular, people in the Randstad, a densely populated region that serves as the economic heart of the Netherlands, are expected to have fewer housing opportunities than those who prefer a home elsewhere because housing market pressure tends to be highest in the Randstad. In the Randstad, housing prices are higher on average, and the waiting lists for social rental housing are generally longer. In the north wing of

the Randstad, owner-occupied housing is expensive compared to renting (Chapter 5), and the rural areas within this part of the Netherlands are characterised by high and increasing housing market pressure (Chapter 6).

Accordingly, Chapters 2 and 3 showed that intended movers who preferred a home in the Randstad were less likely to change residence than those who preferred a home in the national periphery. This thesis demonstrated that high housing market pressure accompanies a lower rate of success in two ways: realising an intention to move and realising residential preferences, as demonstrated in the last two empirical chapters of this thesis.

Chapter 5 showed that if owning is expensive relative to renting in the region where intended movers preferred to move, aspiring homeowners were less likely to realise a preference to move into homeownership. Somewhat surprisingly, a high house price-to-rent ratio was not associated with a higher degree of substitution: it did not lead to a higher likelihood of moving to a rental home. Once intended movers have formed a manifest preference to move into homeownership, they do not seem willing to give up this preference because of housing market circumstances. This might be related to the finding that intended movers have adjusted their tenure preferences to the regional housing market circumstances. If owning is expensive compared to renting, people were significantly less likely to prefer to move into homeownership. Particularly in the regions in which the house price-to-rent ratio is relatively high (in the regions within the Randstad and in the central-south of the Netherlands), people tended to express a preference to move into homeownership less often and they also realised this preference less frequently.

The results of Chapter 6 suggest that high housing market pressure tends to hamper the realisation of rural location preferences. As discussed in Section 7.2, many intended movers who preferred rural housing in a specific municipality stayed in their current home, whereas others moved to a different residential environment or location than they initially preferred. In particular, people who preferred to move to rural areas with highly pressured housing markets, which are often rural areas within the urban sphere of influence, were less likely to realise this preference and were more likely to move to an urban area than were people who preferred to move to a rural area with a less pressured housing market. The findings of the study also suggest that the local housing market pressure is more important to the realisation of rural location preferences than to the formation of location preferences among rural residents. The proportion of rural residents who preferred to move to a rural area within their current municipality did not differ between rural areas with a highly pressured housing market and rural areas with a lower pressured housing market. It could be that

many rural residents are attached to their current locality. This attachment may have a social dimension, such as social ties or familiarity with fellow residents, and a physical dimension, referring to both the built and the natural environment (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). It is precisely this attachment to their residential environment and locality that may make rural residents less likely to prefer to move beyond the boundaries of their current locality, even if the housing market pressure is high.

Attachment to the current residential location and environment type also seems to play a role in the extent to which people realise or substitute their rural location preferences. Rural residents who preferred to move to a rural area within their municipality (the so-called intended local movers) were more likely to realise their rural location preference and were less likely to move to a location different from their initial preference than were intended non-local movers (Chapter 6). Whereas urbanites had a higher likelihood of moving to an urban area, non-urbanites were more likely to move to a rural area in a municipality other than their initial preference. The results indicate the importance of place attachment over financial resources for the extent to which people realise or adjust their rural location preferences. These findings may also suggest that the rural location preferences of intended non-local movers are more fluid than those of intended local movers.

7.6 Reflection on the longitudinal research approach

Throughout this thesis, the longitudinal research approach has proved valuable for gaining a better understanding of the mechanisms underlying the discrepancy between stated mobility preferences and actual mobility behaviour. The longitudinal research approach leads to a more accurate picture of the extent to which people are able to move if they intend to do so than the cross-sectional approach (Chapter 2). In the cross-sectional approach, the number of recent movers is compared with the number of people who are actively searching for a home but have not moved in the same period. Because this type of comparison counterbalances “non-realizations” with “unexpected moves”, cross-sectional approaches lead to a smaller intention–behaviour discrepancy and hence to a less accurate portrayal of the extent to which mobility intentions are realised than the longitudinal approach.

Following individuals’ actual mobility behaviour longitudinally has also shed light on old findings. For instance, non-longitudinal studies generally show that homeowners are less likely to have a positive attitude towards moving than renters and that they move less frequently. Chapters 2 and 3 showed that a

different picture emerges when people are followed over time and when potential differences in residential preference and renters' stronger intention to move are taken into account. Homeowners were more likely to realise their strong intention to move than were renters who preferred to move within the rental housing sector (Chapter 3). In fact, Chapter 2 indicated that renters who preferred to move within the rental housing sector had the lowest probability of moving, which suggests that, in the Netherlands, the barriers to moving are particularly large in the social rental housing sector.

Another example relates to concerns expressed in the rural gentrification literature that rural residents have difficulties finding homes within their locality due to the demand for rural housing by relatively wealthy non-locals, particularly urbanites. Though it might be true that, at the aggregated level, poorer groups are moving out of rural areas while more affluent groups are moving in (Daalhuizen et al., 2011; Van Dam, 1996, both for the Netherlands), this does not imply that rural residents have greater problems securing rural housing than non-locals. Although many intended non-local movers, particularly those originating from urban areas, have the potential to outbid intended local movers, rural residents who preferred to move to a rural area within their municipality were more likely to realise their rural location preference than were intended non-local movers (Chapter 6). The longitudinal approach reveals that behind the mobility patterns at the aggregate level, diffuse residential mobility decisions made at the individual level may hide.

7.7 Reflections on working with a linked panel

The longitudinal analyses presented in this thesis are based on large-scale, cross-sectional housing surveys that are enriched with longitudinal register data. This innovative longitudinal data set has important advantages over the (often small-scale) panel surveys generally used for the investigation of discrepancies between stated attitudes towards moving and actual mobility behaviour. Panel surveys often have difficulties to track respondents, especially if the study is conducted over a long period. This is particularly problematic for investigating behavioural inconsistencies in the residential mobility decision-making process because movers are more difficult to trace than non-movers. The longitudinal data set used for this thesis is free from panel attrition and attrition bias. The combination of survey and register data facilitated the tracking of all respondents over time and the creation of a data set large enough to perform in-depth analyses with great statistical power.

Nonetheless, the use of register data to monitor actual residential behaviour has some drawbacks that should be addressed. First, it was not always easy to obtain the required information in the desired form from the SSD (see also Smits, 2010). In particular, it was time consuming to monitor life events in the household career at the individual level (for more information, see Chapter 4). Second, the register data provides a somewhat limited picture of the “final” stage of the mobility decision process. It provides little to no insight into the search process and the trade-offs between the various residential preferences. If intended movers have not moved within two years, it is impossible to say whether these non-moves are truly “non-realizations”. While some intended movers may still be searching for a new home, others may no longer have an intention to move or may have postponed their intention to move. Intentions may fade, but the data do not provide information about whether or how quickly this happens.

7.8 The importance of stated preferences for revealed preferences

Even though the predictive value of stated intentions to move for actual mobility behaviour proved to be limited, people who intended to move relocated considerably more often than those who intended to stay in their home. Therefore, intentions to move, particularly strong intentions to move, are important predictors of subsequent mobility behaviour. However, when using stated preferences as an indicator for housing preferences and for future migration flows or housing demand, as is sometimes done in housing research (Clark & Deurloo, 2006; Yang, 2000), researchers should bear in mind that such preferences only offer a glimpse into the actual residential choices of individuals (revealed preferences). Stated preferences also provide little insight into moves that occur almost immediately after the decision to change residence, such as moves triggered by the dissolution of a co-residential union. Furthermore, as with actual residential behaviour, stated preferences may reflect not only what people desire to accomplish in their housing career but also the (perceived) constraints and restrictions, that is, what people perceive as possible given their financial means and housing market circumstances. Moreover, stated preferences are fluid and may vary along a continuum. As Rossi (1955) argues, “At any point in time, a survey of households will find some that are at the point of moving, others feeling vaguely that they would like to do so, and still others can be found who are firmly wedded to their present residences.” (p. 66). Some people without a stated intention to move may have a latent desire to change residence that has not yet crystallised into a mobility intention.

As with other studies on the realisation of positive attitudes towards moving (e.g., De Jong et al., 1985; Duncan & Newman, 1976), it was fairly difficult to explain why people did not behave according to their initial intention to move based on life course characteristics and the changes therein, residential preferences, and contextual circumstances. The explanatory power of the multivariate models, indicated by the pseudo R^2 , was often modest. This difficulty might be related to the fact that some of these factors are already considered in the formation of mobility intentions and residential preferences. Perhaps there are other factors that interfere with the outcome of the individual mobility decision-making process. For example, it could be that many people who intend to move may not have passed the critical threshold at which the benefits of moving surpass the costs of moving and at which point they may begin searching for a house. Furthermore, the findings of Chapter 6 hint at the relevance of socio-psychological factors, such as place attachment. Neighbourhood attachment has been found to decrease the likelihood of having a positive attitude towards moving (for instance, see Lee et al., 1994; Permentier et al., 2009). The inclusion of information about place attachment may contribute to this strand of literature by revealing whether place attachment also explains why so many intended movers do not change residence and why some choose different locations than those they initially preferred. Future research must take on the challenging task of further unravelling the interwoven factors – motivational, life course-related, contextual, and socio-psychological – that may lead to behavioural inconsistencies in the individual mobility decision-making process. In-depth qualitative research may provide valuable insights into the dilemmas, considerations, barriers, and socio-psychological factors that cause people to stay in their current homes despite their initial intention to change residences or to make housing choices other than initially preferred.

Despite the unresolved issues regarding behavioural inconsistencies in the mobility decision-making process, this thesis has provided a better understanding of the mechanisms underlying the discrepancy between attitudes towards moving and actual mobility behaviour. It is shown that the mobility behaviour of intended movers depends not only on life course characteristics but also on anticipated and unanticipated changes to these characteristics. Preferences regarding home and residential location, as well as the willingness to accept a home that does not meet the initial residential preferences, affect the likelihood of realising an intention to move. Stated preferences and revealed preferences alone cannot fully explain the complex individual mobility decision-making processes underlying potential moves.

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