Commuter partnerships: balancing home, family, and distant work
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Introduction

Interviewer: First I have a general question for you: What was the motive for you to start commuting between two residences?
Respondent: The motive was the fact that Delia got this job in Brussels (...) and that, if she really wants to do that job properly, it is not possible to commute from Amsterdam.
Interviewer: But did you consider moving to Brussels with the family?
Respondent: No. No, not for a moment. (...) Our youngest daughter is currently taking her final exams. And at the time when we had to decide what to do, our youngest daughter was not willing to move to Brussels, and it was the most logical choice that she would finish her school here in Amsterdam. In addition, the question would have been in which way we would leave for Brussels. Would that imply that we should sell our house in Amsterdam, or that we should rent it out, what would we do about that? And what would I have to do in Brussels? I would not be sure to find a job there. So, that is actually something... well, of course the option crossed our minds once or twice, like, it is one possibility. And if we wouldn’t have had children, maybe I would have thought, like, let me see what I can find over there. But under the circumstances it has not really been an issue that we really considered. (Stefan, 51 years, lawyer)
1.1 Individual life courses and partnerships in late modernity

This study is about commuter partnerships. The commuter partnership is a particular non-standard household arrangement in which, for part of the time, one partner lives near his or her work and away from the communal family home, because the commuting distance is too great to travel on a daily basis.

Although the nuclear family continues to be a dominant family arrangement in the Netherlands, all kinds of new household types have emerged and become socially acceptable. There are variations in the composition of households and the geographical organization of households and partnerships. As a result of the increased divorce rate, we see single-parent families, co-parenting families, and patchwork families, and there has been a steady growth in single-person households. Examples of non-standard geographical arrangements are Living-Apart-Together (LAT) couples, expatriate families, long distance commuters, and international commuters. Another type is the commuter partnership; it has also been referred to in the literature as commuter marriage (Gerstel & Gross, 1982, 1984; Gross, 1980; Winfield, 1985), commuter family (Anderson & Spruill, 1993), and dual-location household (Green, Hogarth & Shackleton, 1999a, 1999b).

The choice of a commuter partnership can be understood as a practical solution for couples and families to match the commitments to work, partnership, family, and residence of all household members. Commuter partnerships are a response to conflicting mobility demands within the partnership. The need to live apart because of work is not specific to commuter partnerships. Some occupations have always required periods of marital separation; examples are families of navy employees, truck drivers and oilrig workers, but also traveling business people and seasonal workers. These occupations all require patterned periods of time away from the family residence. In the case of commuter partnerships, however, the need to live apart is not caused by the occupational specifics. Instead, it is a combination of the individual commitments of both partners that leads to the choice of two separate residences. Organizing the activities of all the family members in a household has become increasingly difficult. This complexity relates to societal changes such as the expansion of educational systems, the geographical scaling up of the economy, fluctuations in the economic climate, the growth in female labor participation, the delay in family formation, and the increase in the rates of divorce and partnership dissolution. Individualization, which is characterized by the ideology that individuals are personally responsible for their life course decisions and life plans, adds to the complexities of the intra-household matching of the commitments of all household members. Furthermore, household arrangements can be adjusted over time to meet changing circumstances, needs, and preferences (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Sennett, 1998).
Most of us know from our personal experience how difficult it can be to assess what choices to make regarding our work, our partnerships, where to live, if and when to have a family, and so on, and how complicated it can be to fit our individual preferences with those of our partner. Nevertheless, the special characteristic of using two residences as a practical solution in matching the various activities is generally still considered an unusual arrangement; especially in terms of the quality of the partnership and family life. The question arises, who are these couples and what moves them to opt for a commuter partnership? What commitments in the life domains of work, family, and residence are crucial in choosing this arrangement? It might be assumed that commuter partnerships are primarily dual-career couples who give priority to both partners’ occupational careers. At the same time, family obligations and attachment to certain residential locations should also be taken into account. There are likely to be (gendered) differences within couples and between different couples in the priorities that lead them to this solution. Some priorities will be of an individual nature; others are likely to be the common interests of the family. The commuter-partnership arrangement might not benefit both partners equally.

The choice of a commuter partnership has direct consequences for the daily lives of the household members involved. One partner routinely divides his or her time between two residences. This division raises issues about the roles of both houses in the activity patterns of this commuting partner. When one location is specifically related to work, how does this affect the ways in which this residence is used? And how does the dual-residence situation impact on a basic life experience such as the feeling of being at home? Other important consequences for the daily lives of the household members center on the shared residence or family home. In the case of commuter families (commuter couples with dependent children in the household), the commuter partnership leads to an arrangement in which the family functions as a nuclear family for part of the time and as a single-parent family for the rest of the time. Thus, the commuter partnership leads by definition to asymmetries in the division of care responsibilities, which might be gendered, but do not necessarily have to be. Here, the issue can be raised how these families create a work-family balance and what enrichments and sacrifices commuter couples experience as a result of this household arrangement.

The societal changes and the rise in individuality that were mentioned above have led to a decrease in the continuity of life courses. Individual preferences can change over time, but so can the circumstances in which a person operates. External circumstances, such as changing job conditions and the termination of job contracts, but also developments in regional housing markets, force individuals to reconsider regularly their commitments in the different life domains. At the same time, personal circumstances, such as health issues, play an important role in making changes in the life course. In that sense, the life course has become contingent on various factors. Although commitments impact on the life course for the longer term, regular
changes and adjustments in the domains of work, family, and residence have become a normal part of the life course. The choice of a commuter partnership needs to be explained within this framework of the contingent life course. The question arises of what the function of a commuter partnership is in the partners’ life courses over time. The time horizons that couples have in mind for the duration of their commuter partnership might change and the actual durations are likely to depend on the external and the personal circumstances that these couples encounter and on their changing preferences and life plans.

Commuter partnerships have not as yet been studied in the Netherlands. The limited number of previous studies of this household type have been conducted in the USA or the UK (Anderson & Spruill, 1993; Bunker, Zubek and colleagues, 1992; Gerstel & Gross, 1982, 1984; Green et al., 1999a, 1999b; Gross, 1980). A study of commuter partnerships is pertinent, because through it we can learn about the functions of non-standard household arrangements in the life courses of individuals in the Netherlands. The structural changes that have taken place in the Netherlands have created the preconditions for all kinds of new household arrangements. Contemporary household arrangements in general have to be adjusted to the commitments of both individual partners. This requirement often leads to complicated issues on how to combine the various commitments and daily activity patterns with one shared residential location. Furthermore, because the life course has become de-standardized, changes in the household arrangement over time have become more common. The commuter partnership as a non-standard household arrangement can probably provide a solution for couples in matching their time-space constraints for certain periods in the life course and commuter partnerships may well occur more frequently in the future. It is probable that the commuter partnership will be primarily a temporary household arrangement, but for some couples it might develop into a more stable lifestyle. This study features a longitudinal approach to enable the study of the function of commuter partnerships over time. This line of research has not previously been followed in the study of commuter partnerships.

This study of commuter partnerships adds to our knowledge of intra-household decision-making about life-course choices. The study takes into account the individual preferences of each partner and their common goals and interests. In each couple, both partners took part as individual respondents. With this approach, I could look into the black box of intra-household decisions and explore how (gendered) differences within households impact on life courses and on household arrangements.

A study of commuter partnerships is also of scientific interest, because questions about the usual definitions of household and place of residence can be addressed. In demography and geography, a univocal link between individual, household, and residence is assumed: every individual belongs to one household and a household consists of a self-evident number of individuals
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who live in one main residence. That a person could be a part-time member of a household and live in more than one residence is ignored. Knowledge about the motivations and daily experiences of those people who do not live full time in one shared residence also sheds light on the habits of the majority who do share one residence and household full time.

In the remainder of this chapter, I present the research questions of the study and discuss the theoretical framework. The chapter ends with a discussion of the methodological approach applied.

1.2 Research questions

The issues raised in the previous section led to the formulation of the main research question addressed in this study: How can the choice of a commuter partnership be explained, what are the consequences of a commuter partnership arrangement for the daily lives of both partners, and what is the function of this household arrangement in partners' life courses over time?

The main research question has been explored on the basis of sixty in-depth interviews with both partners in thirty commuter couples. The analysis consists of several parts that are presented as four chapters in this thesis. These look into commuter partnerships from different angles. Each chapter has been accepted for publication or has already been published as an article in an international peer-reviewed scientific journal. Together, the chapters form the complementary research outcomes that provide the basis for an answer to the main research question.

Chapter two takes up the first segment of the main research question, in which I explore how the choice of a commuter partnership can be explained. The research questions addressed in chapter two are: To what extent do couples consider the alternatives of migrating or not migrating as a couple before opting for a commuter partnership? How are the commitments leading to a commuter partnership related to the life domains of work, family and residence? How can the choice for a commuter partnership be explained in terms of individual and common interests and gender dispositions within the partnership?

Chapters three and four center on the second segment of the main research question: the consequences of a commuter partnership arrangement for the daily lives of both partners. In chapter three, the focus is the daily life experiences of the commuting partners, who routinely divide their time between two residential locations: the residence near the workplace (referred to as the commuter residence) and the shared residence in which their partner lives full time (referred to as the communal residence). In this chapter, I explore the impact of the dual-residence situation of the commuting partner on the experience of home. The research question addressed in chapter three is: What is the meaning of the commuter residence for the commuting partner in terms of home?

In chapter four, the focus moves to the daily-life experiences of the commuter couples who have dependent children living in their household: the
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Commuter families. These household arrangements function as a nuclear family part of the time, when the commuting parent is present at the communal residence, and as a single-parent family during the days when the commuting parent is away for work. In this chapter, I explore how the partners create a work-family balance. The research questions addressed in chapter four are: What are the strategies of commuter families in balancing work and family? What are the differences in terms of gender? What are the sacrifices and the enrichments of this specific work-family strategy?

Chapter five features the third segment of the main research question: the function of the commuter partnership arrangement in partners’ life courses over time. For this chapter, all thirty commuter couples took part in a follow-up survey several years after the interviews, documenting how their household arrangement had developed over time. The research questions in this chapter are: What time horizons do couples have in mind for the future course of their commuter partnership, and to what extent do these time horizons coincide with the actual course? How can continuity or change in couples’ life courses explain the development of their household arrangement over time?

In chapter six I report the conclusions drawn from the combined research findings of the previous chapters, reflect on the theoretical and methodological approach, and put forward lines for further research.

1.3 Commuter partnerships and commitments

1.3.1 Commitments in the life course

In the theoretical background of the research project, the concept of commitment is central (Becker, 1960; Bonney, McCleery & Foster, 1999). Commitment can be defined as a life choice which has long term consequences that are not changeable at all, or only at a high cost (Becker, 1960; Feijten, Mulder & Baizán, 2003; Mulder, 2002). The matching of commitments to partners’ jobs with commitments to the residential location and commitments regarding family life form the basis of the choice of a commuter partnership. This choice is regarded as a life-course choice made by couples who would prefer to live full time in one shared residence, but who opt for a commuter partnership when the benefits outweigh the disadvantages.

The life-course approach generally focuses on parallel careers that develop simultaneously, such as the occupational, educational, residential, family, and partnership careers (Elder, Kripkpatrick Johson & Crosnoe, 2003). For analytical reasons, these careers can be grouped into several life domains. For the study of commuter partnerships, three life domains are distinguished: the work domain, including careers in education and occupation; the household domain, which involves the partnership and family careers; and the residential domain, which includes the characteristics of the housing career. The work domain involves the choices regarding the occupational career that are influenced by potential income, self-fulfillment, job location, and so forth. In this domain, for example, a person chooses the
number of hours to work and makes job mobility choices. In the household domain, people make choices about the time they want to spend together or individually, about their family size, and about household arrangements. In the residential domain, preferences can change over time according to life phases, household needs, lifestyle, and income.

Individuals develop commitments in each domain. A commitment made in one domain can have unintended consequences for other domains (Willekens, 1991). As a result, commitments can conflict with each other, for example when the job requires a person to be away from home frequently while also committed to daily family-care responsibilities. Some of the literature points out, however, that commitments in different life domains can also bring mutual enrichments, for example when positive experiences in the occupational career bring inspiration to the partnership career and vice versa (Greenhaus & Beutel, 1985; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006).

The need to synchronize and combine individual and collective family commitments arises as a result of the interwoven lives of partners (Hagestad, 1981). The choice of a commuter partnership is then regarded as the outcome of deliberations about the importance of different commitments for both partners individually and as a couple. The motivation to opt for a commuter partnership might be found in the timing and synchronization of the different commitments of both partners. The commuter partnership is then regarded as a temporary arrangement that will be terminated as soon as the couple succeeds in synchronizing both partners’ commitments in such a way that they can resume living in one shared residential location full time. A further matter that can be raised is whether the commuter partnership is always a temporary arrangement. For some couples, this household arrangement might evolve into a lifestyle (Green et al., 1999a, 1999b). It is likely that the time horizons that couples have in mind for the duration of their commuter partnership depend on the function that this household arrangement has in the life course and will therefore differ between couples. Time horizons can be focused on the short term or longer term and they can be well defined or open ended (Hitlin & Elder, 2007).

1.3.2 Commitments to working lives in a scaled-up economy

The complexity of matching commitments in the different life domains of both partners has grown in the last decades owing to structural changes in post-industrial societies. A process of geographical scaling up has contributed to a growth of the job-related mobility of individuals (Hardill, 2004; Larsen, Urry & Axhausen, 2006; McDowell, 2006; Scott, 2006; Urry, 2004). The geographical scaling up of the economy in late modernity is unprecedented and demands highly-skilled workers who are flexible and willing to be mobile over long distances for work (Scott, 2006; Sennett, 1998). Owing to the improved accessibility of higher education, the numbers of skilled and mobile workers have substantially increased (Börsch-Supan, 1990). The scaling up of networks has become culturally normal, especially among
the highly-skilled middle class, leading to a wide appreciation of mobility capital on workers’ résumés (Scott, 2006). Developments in communication technology have enabled companies and individuals to engage in global networks, which in turn increase the desire and need for individuals to be mobile (Castells, 1996; Favell, Feldblum & Smith, 2006). Geopolitical shifts, such as the European Schengen Treaty that facilitates the unrestricted travel of individuals within the European Union, have set crucial preconditions for the scaling up of mobility (Ackers, 1998). Furthermore, the rise in affordable travel opportunities, through budget airlines and high-speed train networks, enable individual workers to travel long distances in a routine fashion (Favell et al., 2006). In the Netherlands, the international orientation of the economy and the hub position of Schiphol International Airport have a strong influence on the attraction and sending out of skilled workers (Musterd, Bontje & Ostendorf, 2006).

The structural changes in the global economy have led not only to increased opportunities for individuals, but also to substantial risks of failure. The global economy has become increasingly oriented onto short-term gains. This characteristic of the contemporary economy has an enormous impact on the lives of individuals. As a spin-off of the deterioration in job security, the stability of other life domains has also become pressured (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Sennett, 1998). Not only has the life course become de-standardized because of individualization and the related social acceptance of alternative life course choices; it has also become contingent on factors outside the influence of the individual.

In addition to these structural shifts, the doctrine that each adult member of society should participate in paid labor has gained ground (Dermott, 2005; Hochschild, 1997; McDowell, 2006). In the Netherlands, this ideal has been actively supported by the national government, leading to a steep growth in dual-income households in recent years, but with a majority of households in which the male partner works full time and the female partner works part-time (Statistics Netherlands, 2008; Portegijs, Hermans & Lalva, 2006; Portegijs & Keuzenkamp, 2008).

1.3.3 Matching individual and household commitments

The de-standardization of the life course puts an emphasis on individual resourcefulness and responsibility in shaping one’s life course. For many, this development has led to a project of the self aiming to make optimal life plans (see for instance: Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Heinz & Kruger, 2001; Sennett, 1998). The extent to which the life-course choices of individuals are actually conscious strategies, or rather the result of routine actions, or unintended consequences of choices made earlier in the life course is an important issue in the literature (see for instance: Giddens, 1991; Jarvis, 1999; Kuijsten, 1999). The scope of the freedom of individual choice has been shown to have distinct limitations (Brannen & Nilsen, 2005; Favell et al., 2006). Moreover, life-course choices also entail substantial risks of failure
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(Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). Individuals may make strategic life-course choices based on assumptions about desirable or expected future changes. Whether this anticipation of future events is realistic depends partly on the resources and restrictions applicable to the household (Mulder & Hooimeijer, 1999), but also on opportunities and constraints created outside the individual or household (Mulder, 1993). In addition, unforeseen circumstances are relevant in the life course. In the case of commuter partnerships, these circumstances may have an important effect on the duration of this household arrangement and the function that it has in the life course of a commuter couple.

For the study of commuter partnerships, theoretical insights into the changing meanings of partnerships are also important (Mills, 2000; Giddens, 1991). Giddens describes the contemporary partnership as pure relationship: a relationship in which intimacy and emotional commitment are central and which is based on democratic and egalitarian interaction between partners. In these relationships, there is plenty of room for negotiation between partners, for instance about residential location choice, family migration, and the possibility of a commuter partnership. In most partnerships, however, the equality between partners is limited. As numerous studies have shown, a gendered approach is necessary in the study of choices made on the household level (see for instance: Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Cooke, 2003; De Meester & Van Ham, forthcoming; Droogleever Fortuijn, 1993; Fagnani; 1993; Karsten, 2003; Komter, 1985). In seemingly egalitarian households when both partners are active in the labor force, individual competitiveness and asymmetries also exist (Hardill, 2002). One partner may feel obliged to give lower priority to individual interests in order to invest in the collective project called family (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1991; Hardill, 2002). Relating to their responsibility for dependent lives, women generally experience less continuity in the life course than men do, especially in their occupational careers (Heinz & Kruger, 2001). Family ideology has a strong influence on the choices that are made regarding the individual careers of both partners and their common interests, because ideology is anchored in everyday thinking and routine action (Jarvis, 1999; Komter, 1985). Although we have seen a growing diversity in household arrangements in recent decades (Latten, 2004; Liefbroer & Dykstra, 2000), the nuclear-family ideal continues to be the basic family ideal in post-industrial societies. The nuclear family is characterized in various definitions as a social group who live together in a shared residence (see for instance: Degler, 1980). The commuter partnership can be regarded as an alternative geographical household arrangement, but the couple involved does not relinquish the nuclear family ideal (Gerstel & Gross, 1984), although for some couples the commuter partnership may evolve into a lifestyle (Green et al., 1999a, 1999b).
1.3.4 Residential commitments and family migration decisions

The matching within households of the residential location with job commitments has been the object of scientific research in geography. Usually, the literature concentrates specifically on work-related migration (see for instance: Sjaastad, 1962; Fielding, 1992; Gordon, 1992) or work-related mobility, and (long distance) commuting (Van Ham, Mulder & Hooimeijer, 2001). Migration decisions most often originate in the work or educational careers (Mulder, 1993). If a job opportunity outside the daily activity space is accepted, migration is the most common solution to create a new geographical match between the residential and job location (Van Ham, 2002). A specific line of research has concentrated on the differences between men and women in the causes and consequences of work-related long-distance migration (see for instance: Bonney & Love, 1991; Cooke, 2001, 2003; Cooke & Bailey, 1996; Mincer, 1978; Smits, 1999). Family migration decisions are gendered household decisions, meaning that family migration takes place much more often for the benefit of the husband’s career than for the wife’s. Women are less likely than men to migrate for their own career and more likely to be a trailing spouse (or tied mover) who migrates with her male partner for his career. Because family migration predominantly takes place in favor of the male partner’s career, women have a lower probability of being in (suitable) employment after family migration and they usually have lower incomes (see for instance: Bielby & Bielby, 1992; Clark & Huang, 2006; Cooke, 2003; Cooke & Bailey, 1996; Smits, 1999; Van Ommeren, 2000). These effects are particularly strong for women who are mothers (Cooke, 2001; Shihadeh, 1991). The commuter partnership can be regarded as an alternative to family migration or to rejecting distant job opportunities altogether. Attention is required for the individual commitments of each partner in a commuter partnership to their occupational careers as well as about their views on the role of the common interests of the family and on their gender role ideologies.

Migration is often researched in an instrumentalist fashion. Migration is then viewed as an easily-verified event that takes place at a fixed moment in time between two clearly-defined locations (Halfacree & Boyle, 1993). The commuter-partnership arrangement cannot be regarded as a form of family migration, but neither can it be seen as a complete ruling out of migration. The arrangement can be regarded as a form of circular migration or recurrent mobility between two residences (Behr & Gober, 1982; McHugh, 2000; McHugh & Hogan, 1995). Over time, the commuter-partnership arrangement may lead to family migration to the new location or to the avoidance of migration altogether, either through reuniting at the original family residence or by continuing the commuter partnership in the longer term.

1.3.5 Time-geography and activity patterns

One characteristic of the commitments discussed above is that they affect the life course over the longer term. Another is that they usually have
Commuter partnerships can have direct effects on the daily and weekly activity patterns of individuals. Since the commuter partnership can be regarded as a response to conflicting mobility demands in the partners’ activity patterns, the question that arises is what the outcomes are for the activity patterns of couples who commit themselves to a commuter partnership.

The geographical expansion of the economy that has taken place in the last few decades in the Netherlands and the growth in modes for faster travel have led to the geographical scaling up of the daily activity spaces of individuals. The distances that individuals travel between work places and residences have increased (Harms, 2003; Statistics Netherlands, 2007). However, when we look at the time aspects of activity patterns we see that activity spaces continue to be limited owing to an individual’s need to return to a home base on a daily basis. Thus, even though commuting distances have increased in the Netherlands, the time spent on daily commuting has remained stable for the last thirty years (Harms, 2008). Furthermore, while the diversity in (fast) modes of transportation has provided opportunities for traveling longer distances, mobility constraints, such as congestion problems, have also increased.

Time-space restrictions are of great importance in the matching of different roles and responsibilities at the individual and household levels (Hägerstrand, 1970). Hägerstrand points to the need to return to a home base daily as an important capability constraint. Furthermore, the need to meet with family members at the home base is an important coupling constraint in terms of Hägerstrand’s time-geography. The introduction of a second residence near the workplace is then a solution for the time-space restrictions that households encounter in matching mutual activity patterns relating to work, family, and the residential location. At the same time, the introduction of a second residence also raises new time-space restrictions and opportunities and it leads to substantial changes in activity patterns. Usually, individuals combine several roles on a daily basis: parent, worker, partner, and household manager at different moments of the day. For the commuting partners (the partners who live in the second residence for part of the time), these activity patterns become divided over two different activity prisms, one commencing at each residential location. In a time-geographical sense, the commuting partner moves his or her daily activity prism to another location near the work place for part of the time and disconnects the daily return to a home base from meeting with the family. As a result, performing the roles that require physical presence at the family residence on those days becomes impossible. This situation raises the matter of how basic life experiences such as the feeling of home are experienced in both residences. Traditionally, the experience of home is grounded in the fusion of the physical unit (or house) and the social unit (or household). This assumption has been questioned in the literature (see for example: Mallett, 2004; Moore, 2002; Sixsmith, 1986). Some researchers have even suggested that, in late modernity, place has become less important as a reference in
people’s lives (Giddens, 1991) and home has become a mobile experience that can occur in different places at different times (Heller, 1995). Owing to the recurrent mobility of the commuting partner between two residences and the continuous transitions between living alone and living with one’s partner or family, the experience of home is likely to undergo change. At the same time, the partner who lives at the family residence full time (the home-based partner) also experiences changes in daily activity patterns related to the varying presence and absence of the commuting partner. In the case of commuter families with dependent children, these changes mean that the family functions as a nuclear family for part of the time and as a single-parent family at other times. The consequent impact on the work-family balance is significant. Although egalitarian partnership ideals might lie at the root of the choice of a commuter partnership, the practical responsibilities for work and care will be divided among commuting partners quite asymmetrically. Family care is still rooted locally (Jarvis, 1999, 2005; Karsten, 2003, 2007) and there is a need for at least one parent to stay within reach of this local activity space of the children. These experiences of daily and weekly lives are likely to influence the future life-course choices of commuter couples and the development of commuter-partnership arrangements over time.

1.4 Methodological approach

1.4.1 Constraints in sampling

Commuter partnerships can be regarded as a relatively new form of behavior and these arrangements are organized in the informal sphere. Therefore, the usual sources of respondent selection and data collection were not appropriate for the study of commuter partnerships. That is, it is not possible to trace them by formal structures, such as population registers or, in scientific research, in sample surveys of the general population. As a direct consequence, the incidence of commuter partnerships cannot be measured. Commuter couples are difficult to detect for various reasons. Married commuter couples were required to live (read: be registered) in one shared residence until the late 1990s in the Netherlands. This requirement made legal residential arrangements for the second residence near the workplace very difficult to arrange for married commuter couples. The recent lifting of this regulation shows that new household arrangements can eventually generate structural changes in formal regulations. However, there is no room in most registers or conventional datasets to enter multiple residences as usual residence. Thus, the individual partners each have to choose one address as his or her usual residence. If a married commuter couple opts for registering each partner in a separate residence, the data will not distinguish them from different categories of couples, for instance those in a stage of separation prior to divorce, or those who are married but who live permanently in two residences. In addition to married commuter couples, commuter partnerships can also be formed out of unregistered cohabiting arrangements owing
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to the increase in unmarried and otherwise unregistered cohabitation in the Netherlands and the general acceptance of this household arrangement (Latten, 2004). For unregistered partnerships, in the Netherlands there have never been formal obstacles to arrange a dual-residence situation. In sample surveys or population registers it is, however, problematic to detect these commuter partnerships, because these couples are often disregarded as members of the same household or family.

Another crucial obstacle in measuring the characteristics and incidence of commuter partnerships is that there is no generally accepted word assigned to this household arrangement. In my research, the term commuter partnership was never used by the respondents themselves, since they had only come to know this term through participating in an interview for this research project. Respondents used such terms as weekend marriage, or Living-Apart-Together partnership (LAT) for want of a more appropriate term for their arrangement. Others are used to having to describe their situation in a short story whenever it is brought up. Furthermore, some general demographic and geographic concepts, such as household, place of residence, and home, proved to have indeterminate meanings ascribed to them. At the onset of my research project, preparations were made to measure the incidence of commuter partnerships in the Netherlands through a sample survey. A specific line of questions to detect commuter partnerships was taken on in the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (Dykstra, Kalmijn and colleagues, 2005). One of the questions that respondents were asked was: ‘Does your partner always form part of this household, or does he/she live elsewhere some of the time?’ Listening to the audiotapes of the interviews revealed that these questions were more difficult to answer than the researchers had anticipated, because of the use of the words household and live. Does a partner who stays in a residence near work for several days a week ‘live’ there on those days? Or just ‘stay’ there? Or, is a partner who ‘lives’ here for part of the time part of this ‘household’ or not? These are ambiguities in meanings that are typical of the new forms of demographic behavior and decrease the reliability of the data produced in sample surveys about new household arrangements, as was the case in this particular dataset.

1.4.2 Selection and characteristics of respondents

The study is of an exploratory nature and is based on in-depth interviews with commuter couples. Because of the absence of a database from which commuter couples could be selected, I searched for respondents through networking, advertising, approaching companies, and the snowball method. Respondents were selected through purposive sampling (also known as theoretical sampling) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Mason, 1996). This method has the benefit that it facilitates the study of a specific part of the population and the selection of respondents based on particular similarities. At the same time, a limitation of this method is that it creates artificial boundaries between people in commuter partnerships and other people with possibly
similar household arrangements. The study is also limited by the absence of a control group of couples who considered the option of a commuter partnership, but decided against it and opted for family migration or the rejection of a distant job opportunity. The rationale for excluding these couples is that they would have been even harder to find, because currently they would not have household characteristics that differentiate them from all other nuclear households. Another important reason for not working with a control group is that the considerations of nuclear family households about family migration and the ways in which these households create work-family balances are the object of most of the research in this field of population geography. The literature already provides plenty of insights into the choices and experiences of these households. For this study, I therefore chose to spend costly interview time exclusively on commuter couples.

This study is grounded in the life-course approach (Elder, 2003). A key criterion in the study was the notion that at least one commitment binds the couple to each location. As a result, at least two commitments form the rationale to opt for a commuter partnership. Through my definition of a commuter partnership, the commitment to the residence near the workplace of the commuting partner is always related to work. The commitment to the shared residence can be found in different life domains, such as the work domain, the residential domain or the household domain. Combinations of several commitments are also possible. Most of the previous studies of commuter partnerships that were conducted in the USA focus specifically on dual-career commuter partnerships (Anderson & Spruill, 1993; Bunker et al., 1992; Gerstel & Gross, 1982, 1984; Gross, 1980). As a result, households other than dual-career couples were excluded. One study, which was conducted in the United Kingdom, included both dual-career commuter couples and couples with single or 1.5 income patterns (Green et al., 1999a, 1999b). For that British study the selection of respondents was conducted on commuter trains entering and leaving the greater London region, which narrowed the study down to respondents who are all occupationally active in the same region and use the same mode of transportation. In my study, both commuter couples who have two residences in the Netherlands, and couples with one residence in the Netherlands and another residence abroad were included, relating to the international economic orientation for skilled workers.

Thirty commuter couples were selected to take part in the research project. Most respondents were highly skilled and employed in specialized professional or managerial positions. Half the couples commuted between two locations within the Netherlands; the rest had one residence in the Netherlands and another residence abroad (mainly in countries surrounding the Netherlands, such as the United Kingdom, Belgium, Germany, but also in Switzerland). In one case, one residence was located in a non-European country (Bolivia). Fifteen couples had dependent children. In each case, the children were living permanently in one communal residence with either the mother or the father, while the other parent commuted to a location near
the workplace. More detailed descriptions of respondent characteristics are provided in the following chapters of this book.

1.4.3 Data and methods of analysis

The research project is based on in-depth interviews, because this method of data collection fits in well with the explorative nature of the research project (Mason, 1996; Wester & Peters, 1999). All sixty partners of the thirty commuter couples took part in an individual in-depth interview. The partners were interviewed separately to enable each respondent to reflect from an individual point of view on the choices that led to a commuter partnership (Valentine, 1999). The narratives of respondents, in which they reflect on their experiences, were complemented with biographical information about their work, residence, and family careers. The interviews were structured around the distinction between the life domains. During the interviews, the interviewer introduced eight broadly-defined themes (commuting rhythm; work; care; household tasks; leisure; residence; day paths; future expectations). Because of the innovative character of the commuter partnership arrangement, the study was best served by a focus on discovering relevant issues regarding this form of demographic behavior. Specific efforts were made in the interviews to create the room for respondents to reflect on their situation in their own words. Thus, seemingly clear geographical concepts, such as ‘living place’, or ‘residence’, were approached as sensitizing concepts (Wester & Peters, 1999).

Two to four years after the initial interviews, all thirty couples took part in a follow-up survey that looked into the development of their household arrangement in the intermediate period. These surveys were conducted by email or by telephone and in some instances led to extended email conversations or spontaneous open interviews. This procedure provided another set of rich qualitative data. The benefit of the follow-up is that it provides an understanding about the duration of commuter partnerships and about the function that this arrangement has in the life courses of partners over time. In providing insight into the durability of commuter partnerships the follow-up is, however, limited, because it measures the development of the household arrangements of the respondents by ‘breaking into time’ at a somewhat random moment after the interviews.

The analyses of the interviews and survey material started from the main research question, which also lay at the basis of the interview themes. The main research question was set out in four separate chapters, for each of which detailed analyses of the interview material were conducted. These analyses were conducted in a combination of an etic, or top-down approach (taking relevant analysis themes from the literature studies) and an emic, or bottom-up approach (working out the analyses in detail based on issues provided by the respondents in the interviews). Coding, classifying, and summarizing the interview material exposed the structures within it (Droogleever Fortuijn, 2002). The units of analysis varied between the
individual level and the couple level, depending on the particular theme. For analysis at the couple level, the interviews of both partners were analysed and compared. The findings from the analyses shaped the structuring of the chapters. In each of these, quotations from the interviews were used as noteworthy examples of the research findings. To protect the privacy of the respondents, pseudonyms were used, but to enhance the comparability of the separate chapters the same pseudonyms were used across all chapters.

Notes

1. Living-Apart-Together (LAT): A couple that does not share a home. Each of the partners lives in his or her own home in which other people might also live. They define themselves as a couple and they perceive that their close surrounding personal network does so as well (Levin, 2004; De Jong Gierveld & Latten, 2008). In contrast, commuter partnerships share one communal home and also have a second residence near work.

2. See Appendix for the complete topic list.

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