Commuter partnerships: balancing home, family, and distant work
van der Klis, M.

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6.1 Overview

This study was 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. The aim of the study was to explain the function of a commuter partnership in the life courses of couples who opt for this household arrangement and to look into the day-to-day experiences of these couples with regard to their working and family lives.

The main research question was: 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 the partners’ life courses over time? This question was explored in four parts that were presented as separate chapters in this book.

In chapter two, the focus was on understanding the choice of a commuter partnership as a non-standard alternative to family migration or to not migrating. The commitments to work, partnership, family, and residence that form the basis underlying the choice of a commuter partnership were explored. I also examined how individual and family commitments were matched taking into account the gender ideology couples held.

Chapters three and four were concentrated on the consequences of living in a commuter partnership for the daily lives of the partners. Chapter three centered on the commuting partner and the sense of home that relates to this partner’s dual-residence situation of. The meaning of the commuter residence was analysed along three dimensions: the material setting of this residence, the activity patterns of the commuting partner at this location, and the social life with family and non-family at the location near work. In chapter four the focus shifted to life at the family residence by analysing how commuter families create a work-family balance. This balance is characterized by an incongruity of the geographical scales of the distant work location of one partner and the local rooting of family life around the family home. In this chapter I looked into the sacrifices and the enrichments that these families experience as a result of their commuter-family arrangement.

In chapter five, I concentrated on the sustainability of commuter partnerships. I also explored the function that this household arrangement can have over time in coordinating the parallel careers of commuter partners.

6.2 Findings and conclusions

6.2.1 Continuity and change in life courses

In late modernity, the continuity of the life courses of individuals has become pressured and adaptability is required over time. De-standardization of the life course has led some households in the Netherlands to opt for the commuter partnership as an alternative to the nuclear household ar-
rangement. My research project addressed the question of the function of the commuter partnership arrangement in the life courses of the partners concerned. In order to understand this function, it is imperative to know what motivates couples to opt for a commuter partnership and what influences the continuity and the changes in their household arrangements. Furthermore, it is important to know how long these commuter partnership arrangements continue and what arrangements follow after the commuter partnership ends.

Opting for a commuter partnership avoids family migration without making the concession of rejecting job opportunities at a long distance from the family home. The initial choice to start a commuter partnership has various rationales. On the one hand is the wish to combine priorities in different life domains for both partners. On the other hand, the idea that a commuter partnership is a temporary solution forms a rationale for this choice.

By definition, the motor behind the choice of a commuter partnership is found in the occupational career of the partner who becomes the commuting partner. The rationale to consider distant job opportunities usually relates to the specialized occupations of these highly-skilled people. The pools of suitable and fulfilling career opportunities are very small. Therefore, these couples do not reject a distant job opportunity, even though its acceptance would not lead to (immediate) family migration. The choice not to migrate raised the issue of understanding in which life domains the rationales are found that keep these couples rooted in their original residential location. These rationales varied. In the case of dual-career couples, the occupational career of the other partner forms the rationale to stay put at the original location. The family domain provides the rationale for commuter families who attach great value to the stability of their family life and who want to avoid uprooting this stability by family migration. The residential domain provides a rationale not to migrate when one or both partners feel strongly rooted in a specific (type of) locality or a specific house. This finding that rationales are found in various life domains is significant for family migration research. The finding provides further support for the perspective that, in order to fully understand family migration choices, account must be taken of the commitments in other life domains apart from the work domain. Moreover, the study shows that often bundles of rationales in several life domains are crucial when considering whether or not to migrate. In the experience of many commuter couples, a distinction can be drawn between the work domain and the private domain. Private can include residential, partnership, family, household, social, and leisure commitments – almost every aspect of life apart from work. This finding shows that the conceptual distinctions drawn between different life domains as they are applied in life course research are fruitful for analytical purposes, but should not be confused with the actual life experiences of most people. Awareness is essential of the way in which people think about their life choices and consider their options, which vary substantially within categories of people with similar choices.
Looking into the life domains alone is not enough to understand the grounds for starting a commuter partnership. These couples do not regard living in a dual-residence situation as their ideal household arrangement. On the contrary, most couples envisage returning to a nuclear household arrangement in the future. This finding points to another aspect of the rationale to opt for a commuter partnership: the idea that it is a *temporary solution*. Couples usually expect their commuter partnership to last for just a few years. Its function is to bridge a period between a prior and a subsequent situation of living as a nuclear household. The rationales for visualizing the commuter partnership as a temporary solution have different backgrounds for different couples. A driving force that applies to many of them is that the distant job opportunity is itself temporary and, for this, these couples are not willing to migrate with the entire household. In other cases, however, the distant employment opportunity is a tenured position, but these couples also envisage a temporary duration of the commuter partnership. Thus, the nature of the job contract is not the only factor explaining why couples hold the view that the commuter partnership will be temporary. The *life plans* of these couples are an important factor in the choice of a commuter partnership. In some cases, it fits the life plans of the couple, because they are in a *life phase* where the common interests are not expected to suffer too much from prioritizing individual careers. The couple might be at the start of the occupational, partnership or family career or at a later stage, having become empty nesters or be about to retire from the workforce. In other cases, the couples’ life plans can incorporate *lifestyle* characteristics that allow for alternative household solutions like a commuter partnership. This is the case for some dual-career couples with or without children, but also for families with traditional gender roles.

The follow-up survey led to the finding that some couples indeed go back to a nuclear household arrangement within two to four years while other couples continue their commuter partnerships for periods of up to ten years or more. In terms of family migration considerations, the commuter partnership is found to be an effective way of avoiding family migration, at least for a temporary period. In the case of continued difficulties in combining both partners’ various priorities with one residential location, the commuter partnership often becomes a longer-term arrangement. When couples do find a way to reunite in one family residence, they do so more often by returning to the original family home than by family migration to the work location of the commuting partner. The single incidence of divorce in the selection of commuter couples studied suggests that this solution to terminate the commuter partnership can be largely disregarded, a supposition that is supported by earlier findings in the USA (Gerstel & Gross, 1984).

The follow-up study further showed that, no matter how long couples continue their commuter partnership, they never come to feel that the arrangement is permanent. Instead, these people continue to picture a future moment where they will be able to reunite in one residential location.
Couples often look at their commuter partnership as a chain of several consecutive shorter periods instead of one continuous period.

The finding that commuter couples hold on to their nuclear household ideals and that they regard their commuter partnership as a temporary solution gives further support to the suggestions made in the literature about the impact on individual life courses of the structural focus in the global economy on short-term goals (see for instance: Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Sennett, 1998). According to this view, developments in the global economy have led to a decrease in job security and an increase in income risks at the individual level. This situation obliges individual workers to be flexible in the work domain. Internalizing of the need to be flexible and the process of individualization have together led people to consider job mobility as an important ingredient in their occupational careers. Furthermore, these structural changes have led many individuals to work on a project of the self, by aiming to make optimal life plans (Giddens, 1991). When the commuter partnership is observed from this viewpoint, a fundamental part of the choice of a commuter partnership is indeed related to combinations of individualization and seeking fulfillment in different life domains as well as risk avoidance and looking at life course choices as temporary solutions. The life histories of the commuter couples prior to the commuter partnership give further support to this view. The couples’ histories are also filled with recurring adjustments in work, family, and residential careers, although such previous adjustments usually took place within the framework of a nuclear household situation. Prior to the commuter partnership, couples underwent extra-long daily commutes or lived abroad as expatriate families or migrated within the Netherlands several times or had previous partnerships and established their current partnership later in life. Making adjustments to their household arrangements in reaction to shifting preferences and changing circumstances in their personal lives or in the external circumstances has always been part of these couples’ lives.

The study also raises questions about the value of the concept of commitment in the structural context of late modernity. Commitment is 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 & Hooimeijer, 2003; Mulder, 2002). The findings from this study show that the need to be flexible can conflict with longer-term commitments in the life course. The tension between flexibility and commitment impacts not only on the domain of work, but also on the other life domains.

I conclude that the considerations of the commuter couples are similar to those reported in the literature for dual-earner families – families who also deal with the complexities of combining the commitments of all family members, but who continue to live fulltime in one shared home (see for instance: Droogleever Fortuijn, 1993; Fagnani, 1993; Karsten, 2003). It is the commuter partnership as a particular solution to these complexities that is non-standard and until now has been pioneering. With the de-stand-
ardization of life courses that has taken place in the last few decades, the commuter partnership is expected to serve as a solution to avoid or postpone family migration for more couples in the future.

6.2.2 Balancing individual preferences and family lives

One of the aims of this study was to look inside the black box of intra-household decisions about commuter partnerships in the Netherlands. Within households, the interwoven lives imply that the activities of the individual household members need to be balanced. This matching applies not only to the individual preferences of each partner, but also to their common interests. The commuter partnership is then considered as a solution when some of the commitments of both partners cannot be fulfilled from one residential location. The analysis has shown that, while it might have been expected that commuter partnerships are established in order for both partners to realize their individual preferences, this is certainly not always the case. The variations with respect to whose preferences are prioritized (his or her individual preferences or their common interests) shows the intrinsic complexities of intra-household decision making. These complexities strongly relate to the partners’ gender dispositions, which are anchored in their everyday thinking and family ideologies. There are distinct differences between couples with egalitarian gender beliefs and those with non-egalitarian gender dispositions.

Two general types of commuter partnership were discerned in this study in terms of the division of paid work between both partners, and by the work-family strategies they employ. These types are also distinguished by the life domains that led to the choice of a commuter partnership. Among both types there are couples without children as well as commuter families with children in ages varying from newborns to teenagers. First, I distinguished an egalitarian type of commuter partnership and second, a traditionalizing commuter partnership.

In an egalitarian commuter-partnership, both partners attach great value to their own and each other’s occupational careers. Egalitarian partners were found to mutually reinforce each other’s interests and commitments. These are couples for whom the importance of both partners’ careers is part of their longer term lifestyle of individualism and symmetrical gender roles. For these couples, the commuter partnership can itself be a significant symbol of their egalitarian lifestyle. There are other egalitarian commuter couples whose choice of this household arrangement is grounded in their life phase. For these couples, the commuter partnership is a household arrangement that suits them as long as the common interests, especially family commitments, do not suffer: usually in life phases when there are no dependent children in the household. In the case of egalitarian couples, the commuter partnership can be regarded as an arrangement that avoids negative consequences for the occupational career of a partner who would otherwise become a trailing spouse in family migration, or of rejecting distant job
opportunities that would force the other partner to be a tied stayer. These egalitarian commuter partnerships are sometimes sustained for many years, because of the continued situation that neither partner sees an opportunity for suitable employment near the work and residential location of the other, and because the couple is not willing to sacrifice either occupational career for the benefit of living as a nuclear household.

The traditionalizing commuter partnerships usually do not want to move their children, and therefore decline the option of job related family migration. Sometimes they also prioritize a certain residential situation. These couples usually apply a traditional gender division of a male provider role and a female home maker role, sometimes combined with a small part-time job. The new feature in these families is not the division of roles, but that the man’s career does not oblige wives (and children) to follow him to another residential location. Although the women in the traditionalizing commuter partnerships did not become a traditional trailing wife or tied stayer, the choice of a commuter partnership as an alternative to family migration or rejection of all distant job opportunities did not benefit the life courses of both individual partners as much as it did for the egalitarian partnerships.

The wellbeing of the children is of great concern in both the traditionalizing and the egalitarian commuter families. The stability of the children is important in the sense that their daily lives are geographically rooted in the local scale, so they are not served by dividing their time between two residences. Therefore, there is always one family home. There are, however, some differences between the two types of commuter families concerning the rationales about the role of the residential domain in the wellbeing of the children. In the egalitarian families, the location of the family residence is determined by the job location of the parent with whom the children live, so the job commitment of the home-based parent is foremost and the residential location of the family follows from that. In the traditionalizing families, the place of the family home, including the type of residential environment (for instance rural or highly urbanized) is a crucial part of the choice of a commuter partnership; the job location of the home-based parent (invariably the mother) is not regarded as a reason for declining the option of family migration. In these families, the geographical stability of the children and the family home are rated more highly than the time that the commuting father can share with his family. For traditionalizing families, the choice of a commuter-partnership arrangement creates a discrepancy between their ideals about the family home as the fusion of the material setting with the social family interactions on the one hand, and the reality of a dispersed family life on the other.

The choice of a commuter-family arrangement should not be mistaken for an indication of a decrease in the importance of family values. In commuter families of both types, the parenting roles of both parents are taken very seriously. The commuting parents combine distance parenting when they are away from the family with spending quality time with their children when
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they are at home. The home-based parents switch between single parenting on workdays and shared parenting when the commuting parent is at home. However, the gender ideologies impact differently in the two types of commuter families in the ways in which the parents balance their time between work and care. In the egalitarian commuter families it is emphasized that the rights and responsibilities of both paid work and family care are to be shared equally between partners. In the domain of work, that ideal of equality is largely realized. However, in the domain of family care the ideal view is not achieved; one parent has sole responsibility for family care for part of the time. Thus, whereas for childless couples the commuter partnership can provide an egalitarian solution for the work-life balance, for commuter families a symmetrical work-care balance is not possible. Nevertheless, these egalitarian families employ strategies to make sure the commuting parent can be at the family home as much as possible to fulfill his or her household and care responsibilities. One way of realizing this is to compress the work week into four days.

The egalitarian commuter partnerships represent the embracing of the pure relationship (Giddens, 1991). The individuality of both partners and an ideology of independence (Gerstel & Gross, 1984) are foremost in the rationale underlying the choice of a commuter partnership. The essential principle of this ideology of independence is that the partnership can only function well when each partner pursues individual fulfillment. In the Netherlands, the egalitarian commuter families with children have incorporated an ideology of independence in their family ideology. This finding differs remarkably from those of Gerstel and Gross (1984) in the 1980s in the USA. The dual-career commuter couples they studied practiced egalitarian gender views regarding their occupational careers, but felt that through their commuter marriage their actions were contrary to their own nuclear-family ideals. Moreover, our finding within the context of the Netherlands is important, because there self-care for children is a long-established and continuing motherhood ideal, also among highly-skilled women. The egalitarian commuter families in this study have further opened up the traditional family ideology that the best way for children to grow up is within the nuclear family with two parents. Instead, these parents attach great importance to being a living example to their children of the importance of being financially independent and pursuing a fulfilling occupational career. Furthermore, they emphasize that the traditional nuclear family is not perfect either and they stress the importance of communicating with their children about life choices.

In the traditionalizing families, the provider and homemaker roles are gendered and balanced in non-symmetrical arrangements. The husbands usually work fulltime and are often away at the work location for five days a week. The wives focus primarily on their household and adjust work obligations accordingly. As a consequence, the traditional gender contrast between a male partner individualizing in the domain of work and a female partner
putting family interests first becomes even more intense in a commuter family arrangement. Interestingly, these couples emphasize the importance of the partners’ independent attitude. However, the female’s independence relates primarily to her role of taking care of the household and family while her husband is away, whereas financially, the family is highly dependent on the income earned by the male partner.

The emancipating characteristics of late modernity that have fostered the de-standardization life courses and the rise in alternative household arrangements are one side of the phenomenon of commuter partnerships. On the other side, the still widely-held traditional ideals about family life and the continuing gendered a-symmetries in work-family balances are also incorporated in the phenomenon of commuter partnerships. This bipolar background of commuter partnership arrangements is also visible in the opinion of some couples without dependent children of the idea of a commuter partnership arrangement with children in the household. These couples were explicitly dismissive about commuter-family arrangements with children. To them, a commuter partnership in which both partners individualize is acceptable as long as there is no responsibility for dependent lives. This view was held by a number of young egalitarian couples in a life phase before starting a family as well as by couples in their fifties and sixties who had become empty-nesters. This finding shows that couples who practice an egalitarian work-life balance (in certain phases of the life course) do not necessarily hold intrinsically egalitarian values that are free from traditional family and gender ideologies.

The dual-residence household of the commuter partnership is accompanied by experiences of enrichment and of disadvantage. Many among both commuting and home-based partners feel the opportunity to have a fulfilling occupational career is a great enrichment. Although there is a general feeling of living two separate lives, many commuting parents interpret the compartmentalizing of work and home as a positive aspect of their working lives. A negative experience is the interruption of the routines of the commuting partner. A downside felt by the home-based parents with children is the effort required to keep the balance between being a part-time single parent and involving the commuting parent in family life. Some positive and negative experiences relate to comparing one’s situation with that of one’s other half. The home-based parents with children, for instance, experience the continuity in living with their children as an advantage compared with the situation of the commuting parent who has to miss out on much of family life.

An additional finding relating to the intra-household decision making is that commuter couples view their choice of a commuter partnership as a private matter. The growing societal demand in the Netherlands, as in other post-industrial societies, for all adult members to participate in paid labor has become widely accepted in households in the Netherlands. At the same time, the idea is anchored in the everyday thinking of the commuter
families to interpret the complex task of combining the occupational careers of one or both partners with the responsibilities of family care as a personal responsibility. Commuter couples do not usually see a task for institutions outside the household, for employers for instance, to share in the responsibilities of keeping a work-family balance. These findings provide further depth for the literature on the personalization of the politics of time and how scarce time is divided over work and care (Hochschild, 1997; Becker & Moen, 1999).

6.2.3 The time-geographical experiences of the dual-residence situation

From the time-geographical perspective applied in this study, setting up a second residence near the workplace of one partner can be regarded as an adaptive strategy for coping with an incongruity in the geographical scales of working and family lives. The commuter partnership can be a solution when there is a distant job opportunity for one spouse, but when family migration is not an option. As the study has shown, family migration can be rejected through the work commitments of the other partner, because of the local roots of family life, or because of particular residential commitments. Compared with nuclear household arrangements, commuter partnerships are characterized by alternative time-geographical mobility patterns: one partner has replaced the typical daily commute with a (usually) weekly or bi-weekly recurring mobility pattern between work and family locations. Thus, the commitment to a commuter partnership has substantial consequences for the time-geographic behavior of couples. A basic finding from the study is that commuter couples generally designate one residence as their primary home and that one partner (the commuting partner) travels routinely between both residences while the other partner (the home-based partner) lives permanently at the shared location. The commuting partner lives in a set of two separate activity spaces, leading to different levels of movement (the travel between the two locations and the routines at each location) and different levels of spatial orientation (each residential location has its specific uses). At the same time, the home-based partner, who has one single activity space, experiences time with and time without the presence of his or her partner. A consequence of the commuter family arrangement is that one parent has sole responsibility for care. This parent has to work out time-space paths for combining work and family responsibilities in a single-parent framework. This situation raised questions about how the usual routines of these couples were impacted by the commuter partnership.

It turns out to be the case that the lives at both locations are very separate. In that respect, the experiences are most likely to differ from those of other households with two residences, such as retired seasonal migrants and other families with multiple homes. How can we understand the experience of two separate lives that is related to the commuter partnership? First, the rationale for setting up a second residence was found to be crucial. The
second residence is there for the work reasons of one of the partners, not for motivations in the private sphere, as is the case for families with vacation homes, for instance. As a result, the commuting partners are focused on the job when they are at the commuter residence. This strong work focus enforces the minimizing of all kinds of other activities, ranging from household chores to leisure activities. Even when the material setting is comfortably furnished, the commuting partner views the commuter dwelling primarily in an instrumental way as accommodation on working days. For the commuting partner, the shared residence is often associated with every aspect of life except work, even more so because the job is physically in a different, distant, activity space. For the home-based partner, however, the personal and the functional are much more integrated. There are, however, distinct differences between the home-based partners with and those without children at home. Among childless couples, the home-based partners often show similar behavior of strongly focusing on work on the days when their spouse is not there. For the commuter families this is different, because part-time single parenting usually requires the home-based parent to spend extra time with the children at home and limit the time spent on paid work.

Second, the difference in the social embeddedness of the two locations in a dual-residence situation is crucial. The social networks are found to be the most difficult dimension of life at the commuter residence. Remarkably, most families of the commuting partners never, or hardly ever, visit the commuter residence. The commuter location barely exists for most families of commuting partners. Furthermore, other social networks at this location are weak as a result of the way in which commuter partnerships are organized. Commuting partners are usually highly-skilled people who select a specific job at a quite random location and organize this as an individual worker. At the job location there is no pre-existing social network in which to be(come) embedded. This situation distinguishes the commuter partnership in a crucial way from other categories of people with multiple home places, such as transnational migrants who choose a destiny based on pre-existing social networks at that location or expatriates who are welcomed as a family at a distant corporate location. The commuting partners that do have a social life near the workplace mainly have contacts from work. At the same time life at the shared residence goes on as usual while the commuting partner is away. The home-based partners and the children do have to deal with the commuting partner’s circle of return and departure and with the recurring act of filling the commuting partner in on the events that have taken place during his or her absence.

A third characteristic of commuter partnerships is the time horizon the couple has in mind for the duration of this household arrangement. Because of the ideal view that the dual-residence situation will be temporary, many commuting partners were found to keep an emotional distance from life at the commuter residence and keep their use of time and space at this location as simple as possible. In contrast, both partners experienced the shared
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home as a much more durable locality. This can be seen in the investments in the material setting, the variety in the types of activity at that location, and the ways in which life is socially embedded at the shared home.

Fourth, cyclical elements of time in the form of varying routines are important and impact differently on each household member. For the commuting partner, the routines at the two activity spaces are characterized by compartmentalization: at the commuting residence the focus is on the job, while life at the shared residence is centered on the private sphere. For the home-based partner there is one activity space, which results in more integration of all aspects of life. However, the coming and going of the commuting partner requires a constantly recurring adjustment from the home-based partner and the children. When the commuting parent is at the family home, there is one more person who can take responsibility for the usual household activities, but also one more personality to take into account. Additional manifestations of cyclical time are the travel rhythm between the two residences and the workday commutes between the residence and work. Although commuting partners travel a long way between the two residential locations, the daily commute between the commuter residence and the workplace was found to be quite small. This is because the commuter residence is instrumentally selected for its proximity to the workplace. An interesting finding from the study is that most of the home-based partners also work on the local scale, close to the family residence. However, the time-geographic rationale for this proximity is different from that of the commuting partners. Particularly when there are children, reducing commuting time to a minimum enables home-based parents to keep their daily activity prism for combining work, care, and home containable. Because they function as if in a single-parent family for a substantial part of the time, the home-based parents attach importance to a containable time-space pattern, which involves spending minimal time on the daily commute.

A striking finding for the commuting partner that relates to the four characteristics mentioned is the common experience of living in two separate worlds: one’s work and one’s private life. Although the home-based partners also drew distinctions between the work and private domains, they had little to report about the bifurcated experience of living two separate lives. This difference points to the distinct impact of time-geographic behavior on the life experiences of partners.

The general picture of the daily and weekly life of commuter couples has shown that the routines of all household members are impacted by the recurring mobility of the commuting partner. The dual-residence situation of commuter partnerships shows that, in an era of high individual mobility, the necessary daily return to a home base, denoted by Hägerstrand (1970) as an important capability constraint, has not lost its importance. The commuter partnership arrangement shows that, in the twenty-first century in the Netherlands, the need to return to a home base still exists, but that is not to say that the home base has to be in the same place every day. With
his coupling constraint, Hägerstrand also emphasizes the importance of meeting with other people, which necessitates several people being at the same place and time. The rise of commuter partnerships in the Netherlands shows that, nowadays, household members do not have to meet at the home base each day. Other social scientists have suggested that place has become less important as a reference to individuals’ lives (Giddens, 1991) and that home has become mobile in the sense that it can occur in all kinds of places at different moments in time (Heller, 1995). This study shows that, in commuter partnerships, the household members at the shared residence deal with the coming and going of the commuting partner. Nevertheless, life at this location is largely characterized by longer-term continuity and emotional rooting. In contrast, the experiences at the commuter residence are characterized by the idea of temporariness and an instrumental focus on work. Bridging the gap between two geographically-different worlds that are a long distance apart is found to be a difficult undertaking. Furthermore, by emotional distancing, the majority of commuting partners make sure the commuter location does not become a threat to the primary value of the family home. This study has shown that, for individuals who are part of committed and intimate relationships, the instrumental choice of having two home bases cannot be extended into personal, existential experiences such as the meaning of home and the feeling of belonging to a place and to people (that is, family members). For many commuting partners, it turned out that ‘home time’ equates with ‘private life’, thus the time spent with the family. In contrast, the activity space and home base near the workplace are kept emotionally at a distance through interpreting the meaning of this residence instrumentally and associating it with ‘work time’. Perhaps home can be mobile and occur in different places if the family is mobile as a whole or if there are other relevant social networks. However, in commuter partnerships, where only one household member is mobile, the experience of home is not mobile. These findings suggest that, for most families, the commuter partnership is not likely to become an equivalent alternative family ideal to the nuclear family, notwithstanding the practical reality that some couples will be in a commuter partnership for many years.

6.3 Reflection on the theoretical approach and main empirical findings

The life course approach was used as an important basis for the analysis in this study, both at the conceptual level and in the empirical framework that was applied. The distinction of various life domains that I used, apply mostly to the commuter couples in this study. However, the study has shown that it is important to be aware of the differences between conceptual distinctions drawn in research between different domains and those drawn by individuals.
Commitment is a key concept in this study, as it is in the life course approach in general. The findings from this study provide substantial support for the theoretical stance taken by various academic authors (such as: Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Sennett, 1998) that, in late modernity, we can observe a decline in the commitment of people to both work and other life domains. The need and wish to be flexible and adaptive was found to be an important aspect of the choice of a commuter partnership. The finding that couples envisage the commuter partnership arrangement as a temporary solution also shows the tension between commitments and flexibility in the life course.

The concept of interwoven lives and the intra-household decisions about matching the individual and shared interests of the couple or family were implemented in the study by exploring the stories of both individual partners. Although the solution of a commuter partnership is not common, the life issues that these couples face are very similar to those reported in the literature of other contemporary partnerships and families. Although egalitarian ideals often underlie the choice of a commuter partnership, gendered differences in balancing individual preferences and shared interests were commonly found among commuter couples.

In the literature there is frequent mention of the ongoing deterioration of the nuclear family as a stable and durable institution in late modern societies. Commuter couples have (for the time being) let go of a nuclear family arrangement, but not of their nuclear family ideals. These couples attach great importance to their shared partnership and family interests and the continuity of their partnership over time.

The literature on family migration was also part of the conceptual framework of this study. The longitudinal data suggested that the commuter partnership often turns out to be a strategy of avoiding family migration altogether and that it is less so a prologue to family migration. Furthermore, the study of couples’ rationales for choosing a commuter partnership provides strong support for the view that research into the rationales for family migration decisions should look beyond the life domains of work and education into the domains of family and residence and also into leisure and social networks.

Through the time-geographical approach that was applied, it has become clear that the commuter partnership arrangement has a severe impact on the daily lives and the usual routines of both partners. These everyday experiences are a substantial part of the explanation why most couples envisage their commuter partnership as a temporary arrangement. This finding shows how not only ideals and longer-term life plans are important in understanding people’s life choices, but everyday experiences are also a fundamental part of the continuity and the changes in people’s life course.
6.4 Avenues for further research

6.4.1 Incorporating alternative time-space patterns into sample survey studies

The longitudinal approach used in this study has led to new insights into the function of the commuter-partnership arrangement in people’s life courses over time. The small theoretical sample of respondents, however, limited the outcomes about the duration of commuter-partnership arrangements. Longitudinal studies based on large-scale datasets are necessary for the investigation of the incidence of commuter partnerships, the duration of this arrangement, and the distribution of the different arrangements that follow the termination of commuter partnerships. The accurate detection of unconventional household arrangements requires the adaptation of the questionnaires of sample surveys. As shown in this study, seemingly unproblematic terminology used in population geography, such as the concepts of usual residence or household, do not take into account alternative (geographical) household arrangements. This imprecision makes new arrangements difficult to detect and hampers the creation of a picture of the variation and incidence of alternative arrangements. This drawback applies not only to commuter partnerships, but also to other arrangements involving multiple residences.

Similarly, sample surveys are not capable of identifying the daily time-space behavior and mobility patterns of commuter partnerships. These people divide their daily lives over two different localities, so they become users of two local housing markets and all kinds of other local facilities. To date, this type of alternative mobility pattern has not been measured accurately in the Netherlands.

New ways of measuring various forms of mobility (including residential mobility and family migration as well as daily and weekly mobility patterns) can provide valuable insights into the ways in which contemporary individuals and families organize their household arrangements. One solution might be to create the possibility in sample surveys of indicating multiple usual residences. An even more dynamic time-geographical approach would be to ask people not just where they live, but also where they spend their time. Room should be included for indicating time frames that change over recurring periods, for instance daily, weekly or seasonally. In such an approach, the distinctions between routine mobility patterns and incidental family migration decisions could be interpreted more fluidly. This would lead to relevant new insights, not only because more households are likely to make similar choices in the future, but also because we could learn how individuals and households cope with the geographical complexities that relate to interwoven lives and the realization of a work-family balance in the era of de-standardized life courses.
6.4.2 Exploring egalitarian and traditionalizing family arrangements

The explorative and in-depth research methods applied in this study provided the opportunity to look inside the black box of intra-household decisions about individuality and common interests within the commuter partnership arrangement. The findings make clear the ongoing need to investigate the practical ways in which work and family lives are organized, including the dilemmas that couples encounter, as well as the motivations couples have for their choices. Qualitative research methods are particularly suited for adding to this knowledge.

Several further research topics can be derived from the findings of this study. One relevant line of research would be to explore the experiences of commuting women including, as a particularly interesting subgroup, commuting mothers. Of the thirty commuting partners in this study, ten were women and three were also mothers of dependent children. These women are at the forefront of female individualization in the work domain, within the framework of partnership and family arrangements. Another attractive research topic would be to generate more explorative research into the intra-household decisions and underlying rationales of not only dual-career couples with emancipated gender ideologies, but also 1.5 earners and single-earner couples. The latter categories might look like the traditional family type with a male provider role and a female homemaker role. However, the findings from this study indicate that, in these traditionalizing families, shifts in balancing individuality and common interests and changes in the ways in which choices are rationalized are also taking place.

6.4.3 Comparative research with other family arrangements

The findings about the life-course decisions and the daily experiences of commuter couples provide several avenues for comparative research projects. One that was beyond the scope of this project, but would nonetheless lead to valuable new insights, would be to compare commuter partnerships with nuclear households who have recently had to consider starting a commuter partnership but chose not to do so and opted for another solution instead. In this respect, three other solutions to the dilemma of a distant job opportunity are worth taking into account. First, these are couples who reject the distant job opportunity altogether and who decide only to accept jobs within their current daily activity space. Second, couples who decide to accept a distant job opportunity and also accept family migration as a consequence. Third, couples who decide to accept the distant job opportunity, but reject family migration as well as a commuter partnership, and who choose instead an extra long daily commute (possibly in combination with part-time teleworking).

A second line of comparative research would be to look into the experiences of other types of family with two or more home places, which includes households with international arrangements. Seasonal worker migrants who go to different countries or regions for part of the year to earn a living are
an example, as are retired persons who have become seasonal migrants who spend different seasons in different climates (‘sunbirds’ and ‘snowbirds’). Expatriate families who spend a temporary period abroad as a family and return to their home country after a few years are another example, as are transnational migrants who leave their home country with or without their partner and children and who also envisage a return at some point in time. Chapter three, which was focused on the experience of home of commuting partners, provides several important factors that should be taken into account in such comparative research, especially when the experience of having two home places are the topic of research. Broadening research along those lines would advance our knowledge into the experiences of multiple homes.

A third line of comparative research would be to compare commuter partnerships with other types of split family. This line partly overlaps with the previously-mentioned line of research into people with multiple homes. The findings from this study into the experiences of commuter partnerships showed very clearly that living away from one’s immediate family members has a deep impact on how life is experienced. A noteworthy type of split family that has become increasingly common in late modern societies is the divorced family. Divorce has led to several new family forms in which the children are split from one or both parents for part of the time. Examples are co-parenting divorced families and patchwork families in which parents and children from various previous families form new households. The sheer growth in the incidence of divorced families makes these households important categories for comparative research with commuter partnerships. It should be noted, however, that the findings from this study do not support the negative connotation of a commuter partnership as (a prelude to) divorce.

Furthermore, comparative research is possible with other types of split family, such as transnational migrants who leave their families behind in order to create a livelihood for their families by working in a country with better income prospects. These migrants often move between the global south and north, but also between Eastern and Western Europe. In comparing these split families with commuter partnerships, the effects of the difference in socioeconomic status of these categories must be borne in mind. That having been said, such comparative research could also lead to unforeseen insights and unexpected similarities in these different categories.

References
Conclusion

tweevertiers met kinderen (Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press).