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

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 in the Netherlands the classic nuclear family continues to be the dominant family arrangement, all kinds of new household types have also emerged and become socially acceptable. There are variations in the composition of households and the geographical organization of households and partnerships. The choice of a commuter partnership can be understood as a practical solution for couples and families to balance the commitments to work, partnership, family, and residence of all household members. Commuter partnerships are a response to conflicting mobility demands within a partnership. The need to live apart is caused by a combination of the individual commitments of both partners. Organizing the activities of all the family members in a household has become 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.

The aim of the study is 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 study seeks to add to our knowledge on the intra-household decision making about life course choices. The study takes into account each partner’s individual preferences and their common goals and interests. Commuter partnerships have not as yet been studied in the Netherlands. The few previous studies of this household type have been conducted in the USA or the UK. A study of commuter partnerships in the Netherlands is pertinent, because through it we can learn about the functions of non-standard household arrangements in the life courses of individuals in the particular context of the Netherlands. Furthermore, because the life course has become de-standardized, regular changes in the household arrangements of families will become more common in the near future. This study features a longitudinal approach to enable the investigation of the function of commuter partnerships over time. This line of research has not as yet been followed in the previous international studies of commuter partnerships.

The main research question addressed in this study is: 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 study is of an exploratory nature and is based on sixty in-depth interviews with both partners in thirty commuter couples. Since there was no 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. In my definition of a commuter partnership, the commuting partner’s commitment to the residence near the workplace is incessantly 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. 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 abroad. Fifteen couples had dependent children. In each of these cases, the children lived permanently in one communal residence with either the mother or the father, while the other parent commuted to a location near the workplace. Specific efforts were made in the interviews to create the room for respondents to reflect on their situation in their own words. 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 arrangements in the intervening period. The benefit of the follow-up is that it provides an understanding about the duration of commuter partnerships and the function this arrangement has in the life courses of partners over time.

**Continuity and change in life courses**

In order to understand the function of the commuter partnership arrangement in the life courses of the partners concerned, I explored what motivates couples to opt for a commuter partnership, what influences the continuity and the changes in their household arrangements, 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 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. The first is the wish of both partners to combine priorities in different life domains. The choice not to migrate raises the issue of understanding in which life domains the rationales are found that keep these couples rooted in their original residential location. These rationales vary. 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 commitments in life domains other than the work domain.

The second rationale for couples to embark on a commuter partnership is the idea that it is a temporary solution. 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 within a few years. A commuter partnership’s function is to bridge the 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 some cases, the commuter partnership arrangement 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. 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 are able 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 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 when 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 study also raises questions about the value of the concept of commitment in the structural context of late modernity. The findings 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. The considerations
of the commuter couples are similar to those reported in the literature for single-residence dual-earner families – families who also have to deal with the complexities of combining the commitments of all family members, but who continue to live fulltime in one shared home. It is the commuter partnership as a particular solution to these complexities that is non-standard and until now has been pioneering.

**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 individual household members need to be balanced. The commuter partnership affords a solution when some of the commitments of both partners cannot be fulfilled from one residential location. The analysis shows 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 more and those with less egalitarian gender beliefs.

The emancipating characteristics of late modernity that have fostered the de-standardized 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 asymmetries in work-family balances are also incorporated in the phenomenon of commuter partnerships. 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 the egalitarian commuter partnerships, the individuality of both partners and an ideology of independence are foremost in the rationale underlying the choice of a commuter partnership. Both partners attach great value to their own and each other’s occupational careers and mutually reinforce each other’s interests and commitments. The traditionalizing commuter partnerships usually decline the option of job-related family migration, because they do not want to move their children. Sometimes they also prioritize a certain residential situation. In these families, the provider and homemaker roles are gendered and arranged in a non-symmetrical way.
Summary

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 a 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 choice of a commuter-family arrangement should not be mistaken for an indication of a decrease in the importance of family values. The well-being 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 well served by dividing their time between two residences. Therefore, there is always one family home. The commuting parents combine distance parenting when they are away from the family with spending quality time with their children when they are at home. The home-based parents switch between single parenting on workdays and shared parenting when the commuting parent is at home.

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. In the Netherlands, as in other post-industrial societies, the growing societal demand for all adult members to participate in paid labor has become widely accepted. 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.

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 is regarded as an adaptive strategy for coping with an incongruity in the geographical scales of working and family lives. 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. The general picture of the daily and weekly lives of commuter couples is that the routines of all household members are impacted by the recurring mobility of the commuting partner. 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
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routinely between both residences while the other partner (the home-based partner) lives permanently in the shared home. 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 a 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 for a substantial part of the time. 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, a situation which is explained by several specific characteristics of this household arrangement. 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 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 other kinds of activity, ranging from household chores to leisure pursuits. Second, the difference in the social embeddedness of the two locations is crucial. Commuting partners are usually highly-skilled people who select a specific job at a quite random location and who arrange life at this location as an individual worker. Furthermore, most do not develop a social network over time. This tendency relates to the third characteristic of commuter partnerships: 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 is temporary, many commuting partners are found to maintain 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 experience the shared home as a much more durable locality. 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.

A striking finding for the commuting partner that relates to the four characteristics mentioned is the common experience of living in two separate worlds: work and private life. Bridging the gap between two geographically-different worlds that are a long distance apart was found to be a difficult undertaking. Furthermore, by emotional distancing, the
Summary

The majority of commuting partners make sure the commuter location does not come to feel like a home that could threaten the primary value of the family home. For individuals who are part of committed and intimate relationships, the instrumental choice of having two residential bases cannot be extended into personal, existential experiences of home. For the great majority of the commuter partners, home is where the heart is that is, where the family members live. 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 alternative family ideal equivalent to the nuclear family, notwithstanding the practical reality that some couples will be in a commuter partnership for many years.

Reflection on the theoretical approach and the empirical findings

Commitment is a key concept in this study, as it is in the life-course approach in general. The findings from this study support the theoretical stance that the long-term commitments of people, both in the domain of work and in other life domains, have become pressured. 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.

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.

The literature on family migration was also part of the conceptual framework of this study. 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 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 changes in people’s life courses.

Future studies in this line of research could benefit from the findings in this study. We could learn more about the growing variety of household arrangements in our society if sample survey studies were to incorporate...
questions that covered alternative time-space patterns of respondents. This study also shows that further in-depth research into intra-household decision making is necessary if we are to understand which motivations and dilemmas are crucial in the ways in which contemporary couples organize their working and family lives. Furthermore, comparative research into various types of household arrangement could provide an understanding of why some couples opt for a commuter partnership while others reject this type of arrangement.