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# Geographic mobility of couples in the United States:

Relocation and commuting trends

Geografische Mobilität von Paaren in den Vereinigten Staaten.  
Umzugs- und Pendeltrends

## Abstract

I propose that the rising number of dual-earner couples in the United States impacts the trend toward declining residential mobility and rising commute times. I describe these mobility trends in the United States, first relocation trends and then daily commuting trends. My research views the commute as the bridge in time and space between home and work that a) reflects couples' negotiation of preferences, relative job importance, barriers, and opportunities; b) has consequences for family functioning, c) reflects gender differences in the ways time and place are organized, and d) varies across the life course, by race, class, and region. I describe differences in family type and family functioning based on the commuting pattern and suggest a course of future comparative research that may improve awareness of how families and couples handle labor market demands, what structures shape the picture of couples mobility, and how nation-specific circumstances orient couples toward certain kinds of mobility and away from others.

*Key words:* Dual-earner couples, relocation, journey to work, commuting, gender differences, family type, family functioning

## Zusammenfassung

Es wird davon ausgegangen, dass die steigende Zahl von Doppelverdienerpaaren in den USA dafür ausschlaggebend ist, dass

Umzugsmobilität abnimmt und Pendelzeiten steigen. Im Folgenden werden zunächst Daten zur Entwicklung der Verbreitung von Umzügen und Tagespendeln in den USA vorgestellt. In meiner eigenen Studie wird Pendeln als raum-zeitliche Brücke zwischen Wohn- und Arbeitsort konzeptualisiert, die a) die von den Partnern ausgehandelten Präferenzen, die wahrgenommene Bedeutung der Berufstätigkeit, Barrieren und Chancen zum Ausdruck bringt; b) Konsequenzen für die Ausgestaltung familialer und partnerschaftlicher Beziehungen nach sich zieht, c) in Abhängigkeit vom Geschlecht unterschiedlich gestaltet wird; d) über den Lebenslauf hinweg in Abhängigkeit von ethnischer Zugehörigkeit, Klasse und Religion variiert. Es werden Befunde zu Unterschieden hinsichtlich des Familientyps und der Organisation familialer Beziehungen auf der Grundlage von Pendel-Mustern dargestellt. Abschließend werden Vorschläge für künftige vergleichende Studien vorgestellt, die eine differenziertere Betrachtung ermöglichen, wie Familien und Paare mit Anforderungen des Arbeitsmarkts umgehen, welche Anforderungen die Art der Mobilität von Paaren formen und wie nationale Besonderheiten zur Ausbildung spezifischer Mobilitätsformen beitragen.

*Schlagworte:* Doppelverdienerpaare, Umzug, Pendeln, Aufgabenteilung, Geschlechtsunterschiede, Familienform, Organisation familialer Beziehungen

## Introduction

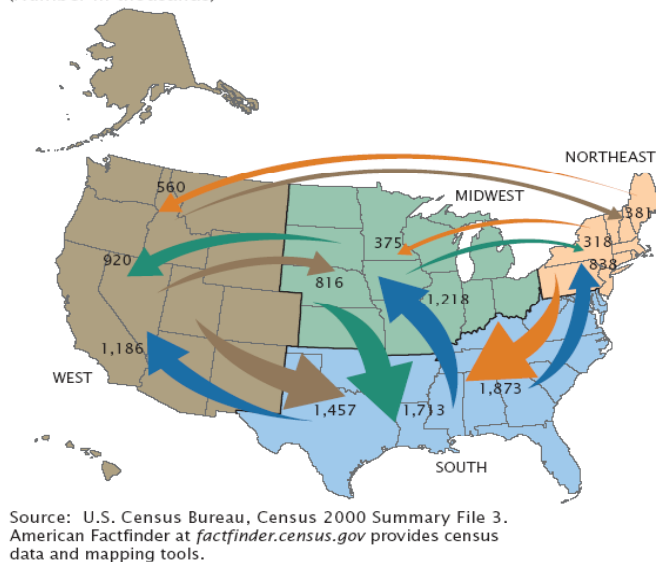
American families are world-known for relocating, that is moving to new communities, often. But national residential mobility is actually declining in the United States. At the same time, average commuting time and distance are increasing. In this paper I propose that these are related via the emerging new dominant family form – the dual-earner couple. I will first describe relocation and daily commuting trends in the United States. Then I describe a part of my research on this topic, and to conclude I propose a course of future comparative research to improve awareness of how families and couples handle labor market demands, what structures shape couples' mobility, and how nation-specific circumstances orient couples toward certain kinds of mobility and away from others.

## Geographic relocation trends in the United States

The particular history of a place shapes its culture, and this is true in the United States as well. As a vast land mass that was not divided up according to ownership until the end of the nineteenth century, the United States' geographic size and historical newness have encouraged the idea of frequent relocation, to improve ones' fortunes by moving – for better land, better jobs, better potential. Additionally, people in the United States tend not to be “from” a place in the same way that many Europeans are. The ties to specific land, villages, or regions are shorter-lived. In sum, there are both pull factors (better opportunities, or the idea of them) and push factors (a lack of ties to the current domicile) that have encouraged higher mobility historically.

Migration in the United States follows a few major trends in the last years of the twentieth century. First, relocation mobility rates are high. Half of U.S. residents moved in the five-year period between 1995 and 2000. Half of these moved within the same county (Berkner/Faber 2003; Schachter/Franklin/Perry 2003). Second, the number of immigrants has been increasing throughout the 1990s. There were 7.5 million new immigrants to the U.S. in the year 2000, who added to the 5 to 7 million new immigrants coming to the U.S. per year all decade (Berkner/Faber 2003; Schachter/Franklin/Perry 2003). Third, the population in the United States has been heavily flowing into the south (and to a lesser degree the west) from the regions of the Northeast and Midwest. (Berkner/Faber 2003). The Northeast and Midwest are known as “rustbelt” regions, referring to their declining manufacturing industries. The South and West have fewer labor unions, lower population densities, lower costs of living, lower wages, warmer weather, and fewer environmental and development restrictions that have attracted many employers. This transformation has resulted in a severe population drain from the Northeast and from the Midwest (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 **Region-to-Region Migration: 1995-2000**  
(Number in thousands)



For most of the 20th century, Americans have moved at a rate of about 20 percent a year; that is, one in five Americans pulled up roots and relocated per year. Starting in the 1980s, though, the trend changed. Annual moving rates declined by 25 percent of the previous level, reaching a low of about 15 percent a year by 2001 (Fischer 2002; Schachter/Franklin/Perry 2003).

During this same period, American wives entered the labor market at high rates and with high educational credentials, enabling them to compete in the labor market and acquire jobs that are worth a great deal to the family economy. The rise in the number of mothers who remain employed while children are young, or who return quickly, is well documented (Moen 1992; Spain/Bianchi 1996). Fathers tend to remain employed continuously. And when there are two jobs attached to one household, a move would have to be attractive enough for both to relocate. One alternative to relocating the household when a job change is necessary is to expand the range that is considered a "local labor market" and thereby increase the daily commuting time.

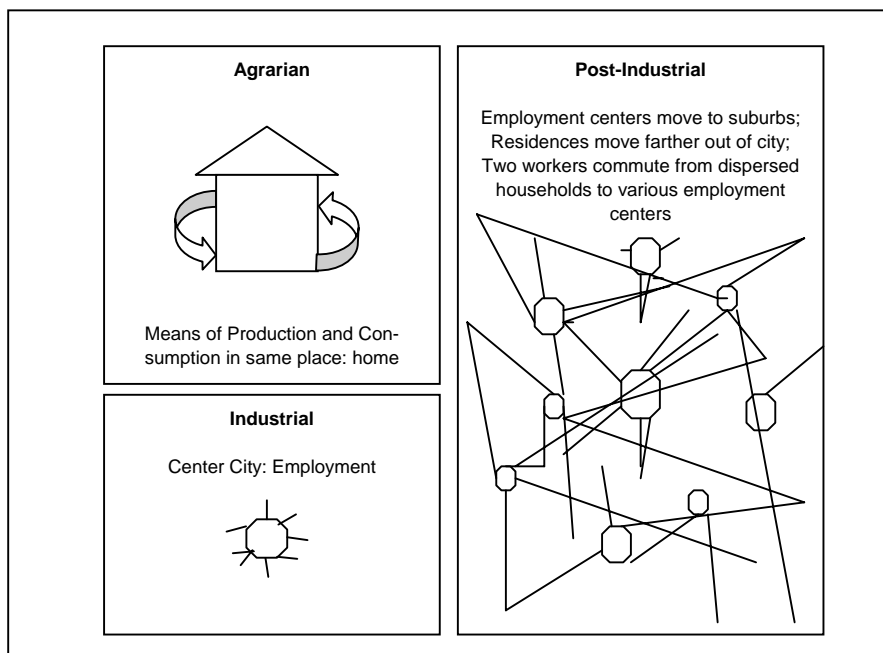
#### Trends in travel time to work in the United States

Americans' relationship to physical space is different from the spatial orientations of people in many other nation-states. Any comparison between most American cities and most European cities will reveal that the structures of the built environment are sufficiently different so as to shape behavior differently. Americans are more likely to use private, single-occupancy automobiles instead of public transit, walking, or cycling. This difference can be explained due to fewer constraints

against private transit in the U.S. (such as low fuel prices and plentiful parking) and to more incentives to drive (such as a lack of alternative sources of transportation, extreme weather, long distances, and individualistic cultural values).

The daily mobility, or commuting, of today's middle-class American families is embedded within an historical framework, as illustrated in Figure 2. Whereas homes were once also the location of production in agrarian societies, the industrial revolution drew individuals away from the home and into factories as the site of production. The American cities of the industrial era typically held manufacturing more centrally and homes just outside the manufacturing ring, connected by transportation infrastructure such as streetcars. Also during this era, individuals and families relocated frequently because the job opportunities varied by region over time and immigration rates were high.

Figure 2 Conceptual Models for Evolving Historical Middle-Class Journey to Work Patterns



Source: Own illustration, originally published in Hofmeister 2002.

Today's picture of the workplace-home connection has changed. Industrial and employment centers are scattered throughout metropolitan areas, instead of concentrated in a manufacturing belt, as economies have shifted to service priorities and as tax advantages create incentives for business to organize in more remote suburban office parks. The decision to relocate the family is increasingly made with consideration for the economic and long-term career (and personal) conse-

quences of both earners. In short, couples are tied to a region because of two jobs, not just one.

Cities are the sites with the largest rise in commute time in the last 10 years. The average increase in work trip time for all major metropolitan areas in the United States was 3.1 minutes between 1990 and 2000, but twenty of the larger Metropolitan Statistical Areas (cities and their surrounding settlements) showed greater increases. For a country of nearly 300 million people, such an increase in the average time to work reveals a statistically significant change over the decade. Short trips are declining; long trips, including those lasting an hour or more each way, have significantly increased (Reschovsky 2004). Workers in Atlanta, for example, reported the largest increase in travel time since 1990, with an increase of 5.2 minutes on average. Atlanta has also experienced the highest rate of development and "suburban sprawl" – unregulated development of farmland, forest, and pastureland near the city – out of all the metropolitan areas in the country. Housing, especially desirable new housing, is often located in these peripheral areas where middle-class families can afford more house for less money on less-expensive land, and the trade-off is a longer commute, maybe for both partners. Among non-metropolitan areas, commute times are also increasing.

Traffic congestion is another major explanation for the rise in commute times. The U.S. has experienced an enormous increase in the use of private vehicles in the past 40 years: 71 million more people are driving themselves to work in 2000 compared to 1960 (Reschovsky 2004). Highways are clogged with cars holding only one passenger; only 8 in 100 cars on the road hold a second passenger (2004). Driving alone is most likely among Americans of European descent, who are also more likely to live in rural areas and earn more, on average, compared to Americans of African, Hispanic, or Asian descent (Reschovsky 2004). This situation of private vehicle transportation is worst in Southern and Western metropolitan areas, where public transit is minimal or non-existent and where the lack of zoning and planning mean many newer residences and housing developments are located on cheaper land far outside of the employment centers. The spread of employment centers along major highways on the outskirts of cities reduces the commutes of some and lengthens the commutes of others and makes a public transportation infrastructure more difficult to establish.

## The commutes of dual earner couples

There is also a gender difference in travel time: men are more likely to have long commutes, women short commutes (Hanson/Pratt 1988b; Johnston-Anumonwo 1992; Johnston-Anumonwo/McLafferty/Preston 1995; Reschovsky 2004). This pattern has been in place in the United States and elsewhere for many decades. Given that men and women are often living in the same households, and in fact often in relationship with each other, my research takes the couple as the unit of analysis to examine this gender difference in commuting time in more detail. Even

though, on average, women have shorter commutes than men, of course not all wives have shorter commutes than their husbands. What predicts the deviations? In addition, I am interested in the consequences of commuting patterns between spouses for family life and family functioning.

I perceive the commute as the bridge in time and space between home and work. Therefore a commute reflects characteristics of both domains and the opportunities and constraints of the commuter. The couples' commute pattern, including relative lengths and costs of each commute, a) reflects couples' negotiation of preferences, relative job importance, barriers, and opportunities; b) has consequences for family functioning, c) reflects gender differences in the ways time and place are organized, and d) varies across the life course, by race, class, and region. I view time as a zero-sum game, meaning that time in one domain can't be used in another.

Research I conducted in the United States (Hofmeister 2002; Hofmeister 2003) focused on the mobility of dual-earner couples using a regional sample in upstate New York. I examined commuting on several dimensions, and, relevant for the theme of this volume on family outcomes, I also looked at the consequences for family functioning of the various styles and types of commuting patterns for dual-earner couples. My focus is on dual-earner couples who manage two work locations and one residence. Some couples have "weekend relationships" or otherwise experience one or both partners traveling frequently for work; these couples will not be described here.

The conceptual overview for my work imagines the commute shaped by work and home connections along three primary dimensions. One dimension is the neighborhood or the geographic location of the home, a place that is both chosen by a couple and also shapes a couple's outcomes (Hanson/Pratt 1988; Hanson/Pratt 1988b). The second dimension is the workplace of each partner, which includes the aspects that make the job worth keeping or necessary as well as the location where work is taking place. The third dimension considers marriage and household attributes, including gender relations, life stage, family status and the duration of the relationship. This nexus of neighborhood, work, and couple-level conditions has consequences for family life.

### Research from Upstate New York

This research draws on one portion of the Cornell Ecology of Careers Study, the Careers I study (Phyllis Moen, Principal Investigator), funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. The sampling frame for the Careers I study is highly suitable for examining the commuting times of husbands and wives in their geographic context. Seven organizations in three Upstate New York areas, representing a range of industries, sizes, and workforces, provided access to their employee base,<sup>1</sup> from which respondents and their spouses elected to participate, giving us a targeted volunteer sample of middle-class employees and their spouses, at least one of

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<sup>1</sup> In some cases, the firms gave access to all their workforce, and in other cases, only their "exempt" (non-hourly) employees.

whom had attended some college (see Moen 2002). It is a large cross-sectional sample with retrospective life history data collected in 1998-1999 including 783 dual-earner couples.<sup>2</sup> Husbands and wives were interviewed separately in one hour telephone interviews.

My operational definition of commuting is in minutes based on respondents' answers to the question, "Normally, how long does it take you to get from home to work (on your main job) including stops along the way for any reason? (one-way)." Because the question wording includes stops made, people who regularly stop at child care, restaurants, or newsstands have longer commute times than others, even if the distance is the same. This bias becomes particularly important when considering the commutes of parents with preschool children.

At the couple level, two measures may be relevant: the actual length of each spouse's commute, and the length of spouses' commutes relative to each other. I want to measure not only "whose commute is longer, whose is shorter" between couples, but I also conceive of a long and a short commute as categories on either side of a threshold of "reasonable" or average commuting. I start with operationalizing the commuting pattern through a categorization around a threshold of 25 minutes, which is the national mean and one standard deviation above the mean for my particular sample.

The commuting pattern refers to the four couple-level commuting time possibilities: whether both spouses commute 25 minutes or more, both commute under 25 minutes, the husband commutes over this threshold and the wife commutes under this threshold, or the wife commutes the longer timeframe and the husband commutes the shorter. For brevity and simplicity, I have named the four commute patterns as follows:

- "Both Short" are couples who both commute 25 minutes or fewer;
- "Both Long" commuters each travel over 25 minutes to work, including stops;
- "Neotraditional" commuting couples have a husband traveling over 25 minutes and a wife traveling 25 minutes or fewer (a modification of the traditional pattern of wives staying home while husbands commute out); and
- "Nontraditional" commuters have a wife traveling over 25 minutes and a husband traveling 25 minutes or fewer (a reversal of traditional gender patterns of commuting).

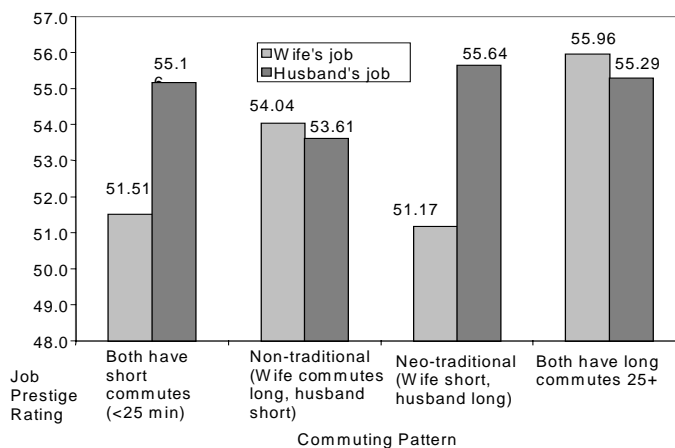
The following section summarizes a few substantive differences among couples in various commute patterns. Couples who are both short commuters tend to be statistically younger than other commute types. They live inside the cities under study rather than in rural areas. Many of them may work at the same company. It is likely that some of these couples met at work.

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<sup>2</sup> The sample used for these analyses excludes same-sex couples, retired couples (where at least one spouse is retired and not working for pay), couples for whom we only were able to obtain one interview, and single respondents. Source: Roehling, Patricia/Liane O'Brien/Shinok Lee/Deborah Harris-Abbott. 2003. "The Cornell Couples and Careers Study: Methods and measures." in: *It's about time: Couples' career strategies, strains, and successes*, edited by P. Moen. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

When both partners are long commuters, it is often as a function of their living in rural or suburban outskirts. The long commuting couples tend to have more prestigious, higher-earning jobs than other couples, especially for wives (see Figure 3). These couples are also the most likely to have young children. Three explanations may account for this. First, our sample represents only employed couples. Women and men who have left employment for child care are not represented; those who stay often have better jobs or more career commitment. Second, for some couples, stops for child care instead of geographic distance are bumping them into this category. Third, the cultural value on suburban living when children are present and the higher school quality in suburban areas compared to areas near employment centers compels some parents to long commutes.

Figure 3: Job Prestige by Couples' Commuting Pattern



Neotraditional commuters are those where the wife's commute is short while the husband's is long. These couples reproduce traditional gender patterns in other areas of their partnership as well: for example, these wives earn less and have less prestigious jobs than other wives in the sample. These couples often relocate for husbands' work and wives seek employment near home after the relocation. They are prioritizing the husbands' career, and though this priority is not reflected in residence near his workplace, it is borne out by a look at the sequencing in the timing of jobs and relocations.

Finally, in nontraditional commuting couples, where the wife has the long commute and the husband's commute is short, wives tend to earn more than husbands and than other women, and wives are employed in current job longer than their husbands. They are reversing traditional gender divisions in ways that include the commute time. In addition, the individuals in this study tend to have longer commutes when they have more prestigious or higher-earning careers. It is clear

that a better job is worth traveling farther to get to, rather than being used as a justification to live near the higher-earning partner's employer. Another aspect to this dimension is likely the condition of the areas near work centers. The cities of Syracuse and Rochester in the study have inner cities in decline. Most couples with financial means to avoid these areas do so.

Half of all couples lived in their current home before starting their current jobs. This indicates a strategy for dual earner couples to ground themselves in a place and then keep their job searches regional. Job changing is common in the United States, but the use of local job search strategies, so as not to disrupt the career of the partner, are common when changing positions.

### How is the work commute linked to family functioning?

The commute is an indicator of a) ties that bind people together, b) ties binding people to places, c) rational/pragmatic strategies and evolutionary family processes. Given that, at least theoretically, the commute reflects these dimensions, it is little surprise that gender differences and inequalities are manifested in the ways time and place are organized.

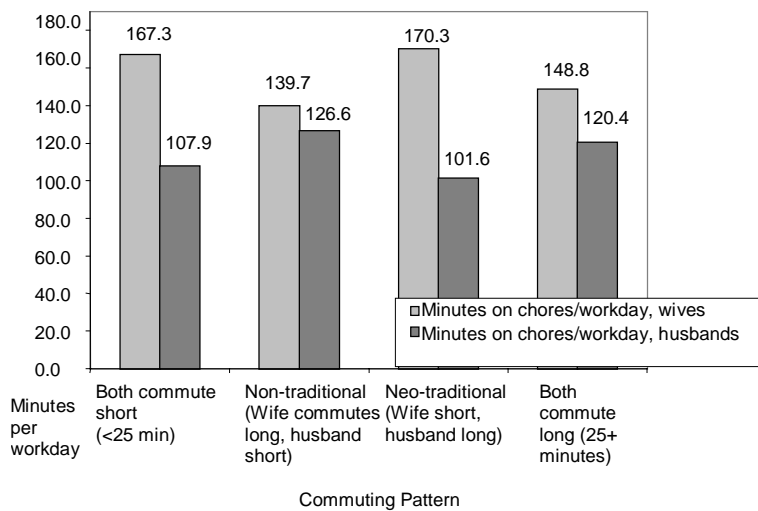
I find differences in husbands' perceptions of control over work-family conflicts; husbands with short commutes, and especially those in nontraditional commute patterns (i.e. with wives in long commutes), feel more control over their level of work-family conflict. Husbands also experience greater positive work-to-family spillover when they and their wives have short commutes. It may be that the short time frame between the two spheres means positive events or feelings at work carry over into home life more easily. Yet negative work-to-family spillover, problems at work disrupting family life, is not higher when husbands' commutes are short, suggesting that it may be the absence of stress in short commutes that could facilitate positive, but not negative, spillover. Negative family-to-work spillover – problems at home negatively affect work – is highest among men in couples where both have long commutes, lowest in couples where both have short commutes, and moderate for nontraditional and neotraditional couples (with a slight advantage to husbands in neotraditional couples).

Wives' measures of life quality tell a different story about potential links with commute patterns. When both spouses have short commutes, wives tend to report higher satisfaction with family; when couples both have long commutes, wives report the lowest average family satisfaction. Negative experiences at work are more likely to spill over into family life for wives with long commutes compared to wives with short commutes, regardless of their husbands' commute length. Similarly, wives with long commutes report feeling more sadness, less personal success at balancing work and family, and less accomplished in their work role than wives with short commutes. These wives, especially with husbands in long commutes, report that they have more difficulty managing family life. There are at least two explanations for the relative hardships faced by long-commuting wives. One is that structures in the community and household are not accommodating yet to the needs of such women, because they are pathbreakers. Another is that the women expect a lot of themselves, as evidenced by the fact that they take on a long-

commute type job to begin with. Such jobs also tend to be higher-prestige, and higher-pay, which also often means higher-stress and higher-demand.

Household chore time is related to commute time (fitting with the household dinner preparation rule: whoever arrives home first starts dinner) and gender (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Time on Household Chores on Workdays by Husbands and Wives by Commuting Patterns



Husbands routinely do less housework than their wives, especially husbands whose wives have shorter commutes. But even in couples where both spouses have long commute distances, husbands do 30 minutes less housework per day than wives. The smallest difference in time spent in housework between spouses is among nontraditional couples. These couples are the most “egalitarian” regarding chores, with wives spending only 13 minutes more than husbands on housework per day. Wives with long commutes have been more successful at inspiring their husbands to do more housework, regardless of the length of the husbands’ commutes, than wives with short commutes. Couples with the largest gap in housework time (an hour and ten minutes’ difference, on average) are those with the neotraditional commute pattern: husbands traveling more than 25 minutes and wives traveling less. One 51 year old professional husband with two teenagers gives a sense of how housework is distributed over the week, and in the end admits that his longer commute has something to do with it:

“I would say that, um, the weeks [my wife] owns. And does a lot for the kids. I do *some* things, but much more limited. So she does a lot during the week. I pretty much handle the weekends. Whatever has to be done. Driving here, driving there, wherever. She doesn’t but I do

most of that. That seems to work. Because of my commute - she has a commute which is only about 10 minutes, I'm 30 to 35 minutes, I'm 26 miles away - she is closer, she has somehow been able to flex her time, and also we have depended, from time to time, on parents." (Married man in his 40s with two children, from interview archives of the Cornell Careers Institute)

The way this husband describes that his wife has "somehow been able to flex her time" indicates how he has individualized and gendered the process of accommodating work and family and the way the commute can be seen as a strategy (for her) or a constraint (for him) in managing their home lives.

### Summary of results

Other researchers (Koslowsky/Kluger/Reich 1995) have investigated the psychological consequences of long commutes, and the popular press assumes such consequences. Long commutes are blamed for higher stress, higher blood pressure, sleep deprivation, and depression, and, for women, unhappiness at home (Longman 2001). I have uncovered some correlates of commute patterns of couples even in this relatively homogenous sample. To summarize, couples who have nontraditional commute patterns or who both have long commutes are likely to spend more equitable time on housework during the week. Husbands with long commutes experience more often that negative events and emotions from home affect their experience at work and feel the least control over work-family conflict than husbands with short commutes. There are several important compensations for women's long commutes, including higher wages, more job prestige, and more assistance with housework. But wives with long commutes tend to feel least accomplished at work, less success balancing work and family demands, and low family satisfaction. Clearly this area of research remains a fruitful one to examine with longitudinal data as well as with a more diverse sample.

Couples with financial means to afford comfortable commuting and a range of housing choices do *not* especially choose to live near work and, instead, live in homes widely scattered from their workplaces. Reasons for this may include: 1) the uncertain job climate, 2) the lack of adequate housing near most workplaces, or 3) choosing a home based on neighborhood amenities and school quality instead. The idea of a long commute (within an hour each way) is generally not discouraging to many American dual-earner couples, but is acceptable at least for one partner.

Families manage their commutes much the way they manage other household labor - for traditional couples, according to strict gender lines (with wives working close to home), and for egalitarian couples, according to job prestige (whoever has the higher paying job is going to commute farther, husband or wife). Families with children are more likely to have longer commutes (husbands and wives) partly due to stops at child care but also because of the cultural value on suburban living and geographic school inequalities.

## Future research questions

My research indicates that commuting can be thought of as another piece of gendered division of labor in the home, related to other divisions of labor with potentially the same causes and/or effects. Gender attitudes cease to be predictive of commuting patterns when job prestige measures are included, but the causal direction is unclear: do traditional gender attitudes create unequal careers, thus unequal commutes, or do the choices about careers and commutes influence the gender attitudes? Further research is needed to untangle the causality of these related phenomena.

Another important open question is how partners' commuting types are related to family functioning in another context, for example in Germany. I expect that German dual-earner couples will be similar to American couples along the following dimensions: a) dual-earner commuting in Germany will have another division of labor in the home, related to other divisions of labor; b) compensation for long commutes may be higher wages, more job prestige, and possibly more family and individual stress; c) communities with many long-commuters should have different structures, needs, and family types than communities with mostly local labor markets.

Germany and the United States have different political, economic, and labor market structures, and divergent cultural norms. I expect that in Germany the following dimensions should produce differences from findings in the United States: a) higher fuel prices provide an additional disincentive to long-distance daily commuting; b) the public transit infrastructure is much stronger than that in most of the United States, which means the possibility for long-distance commuting by means other than a private automobile are expanded; c) workers experience relatively higher job security, which means they change jobs less often compared to American workers; d) the attachment to a particular community or family home is much higher, which would increase the probability of a worker commuting a long distance instead of relocating; e) there is a much greater difficulty relocating compared to the United States because apartments in Germany, unlike in the United States, require a high investment of the renters' time and money because they typically do not come with kitchen cabinets, counters, sinks, appliances, lights, and sometimes even flooring and wall coverings and the housing market moves much more slowly, making household relocation a lengthy and complex process compared to the United States; f) unemployment as an alternative to job relocation is more acceptable or possible than in the United States, where unemployment is not a long-term viable option.

Next steps for effective research on the cross-national comparison of commuting patterns in couples would take a longitudinal, comparative viewpoint focused on identifying family structure and individual and couple-level agency and how these may differ across divergent national contexts. The primary theoretical question of interest would be whether families use commute patterns as part of active conscious plans to reduce or eliminate certain work and family conflicts, or do they

take on specific commuting patterns and then discover in practice that it is functional or non-functional for themselves? It is a question of active versus passive planning and agency. Related questions include understanding the consequences of changes in family life courses on commutes, and the effects of changes in commutes on the family life course. Do families entering a specific life stage adjust commute lengths, for example, when a child is born or leaves the home? In the course of a family's trajectory, are wives with long commutes more likely than husbands with long commutes to change workplaces to be closer to home over time? Are families more likely to relocate over time to be near one spouse's work, and if so, which spouse is favored, and under what circumstances? Is one of the consequences of long commuting – job conditions aside – a suppression of family intentions; that is, do long commutes lead to reduced overall fertility? Does it depend upon which spouse is the long commuter? Do neotraditional commuters move toward gender-typical divisions of housework, or do gender-typical couples also organize their commutes in neotraditional ways? And finally, what is the role of local and regional infrastructure including job markets on commuting patterns, and how is this changing over time?

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