



# Constructing work travel inequalities: The role of household gender contracts

Ana Gil Solá

Unit for Human Geography, Department of Economy and Society, School of Business, Economics and Law, University of Gothenburg, Box 625, 405 30 Göteborg, Sweden



## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 14 January 2015

Received in revised form 25 February 2016

Accepted 20 April 2016

Available online xxxx

### Keywords:

Gender contract

Household negotiation

Work travel

Commuting

Regional enlargement

Gothenburg

## ABSTRACT

This article analyses how cohabiting women and men negotiate and respond to individual needs and claims related to commuting. The study is based on 20 in-depth interviews with parents of small children, who were highly skilled participants in specialized labour markets, living in the Gothenburg urban region of Sweden. The study applies a time-geography theoretical perspective and uses the concept of gender contract in analysing the interviews. In terms of work travel in everyday life, three distinctive types of gender contracts are identified: *the traditional gender contract*, *the gender-equal contract*, and *the mixed gender contract*. These contracts illustrate how individuals and households handle surrounding socio-spatial structures differently depending on their perceptions and manifestations of gender relationships. The identification of different contracts among the respondents indicates both re-enactment of and opposition to stereotypical gender structures in society; moreover, these contracts illustrate the individual's manoeuvring room within the frames of organizing structures.

© 2016 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Work travel is of strategic importance in daily living. It links personal life and working life, enables reach and access on the labour market, and can manifest gendered relationships between women and men. Accordingly, commuting is a concern at both the individual and household levels as well as for policy and planning at various levels. In Sweden, the policy of regional enlargement – i.e., promoting the geographical extension of labour markets and associated longer commuting distances – is embraced as a means of stimulating economic growth and welfare (Ministry of Enterprise, 2006, 2015). Extended commuting is believed to facilitate the process of matching employees with proper qualifications to relevant jobs and higher incomes, allowing regions to become more competitive in a globalizing world (Gadd et al., 2008). However, because different social groups have different opportunities to travel, and therefore different degrees of access to adequate labour markets, conceiving of high mobility as a solely positive problem solver is problematic, especially when transformed into urban and regional policy. For example, women generally and historically commute considerably shorter distances than do men in Sweden and elsewhere (Axisa et al., 2012; Crane, 2007; Fults and Börjesson, 2010; Gil Solá and Vilhelmson, 2012; Hjorthol, 2012; Sandow, 2008; Scheiner et al., 2011). A critical issue is therefore whether women and men benefit from the process of regional enlargement to the same extent. Disturbingly, the role and

consequences of ever longer work trips in daily living are rarely highlighted in this political discussion.

Research demonstrates that women and men still have different everyday lives in terms of their experiences, opportunities, and desires. These differences are reflected in different mobility patterns and perceptions of everyday mobility (Friberg, 2005; Friberg et al., 2004; Kwan, 1999; Law, 1999). For example, women experience more time-space fixity constraints in everyday life than do men, due to their engagement in housework and childcare activities (Schwanen et al., 2008). Furthermore, being married (or cohabiting) and having children affect women's and men's commuting patterns differently in terms of distance, time expenditure, and mode choice (Fults and Börjesson, 2010; Gil Solá, 2013; Sandow, 2008). One weakness of current research, however, is that little is known about the processes by which gender shapes mobility, for example, via practices, identity-shaping processes, and power relationships (Hanson, 2010; Law, 1999). So far, many studies focusing on gender and commuting, or on everyday mobility, are abstract statistical explorations loosely connected to gender theory (see next section) that cannot capture concrete situations and processes when mobility patterns are formed (for exceptions, see, e.g., Bonham and Wilson, 2012; Friberg, 1990; Scholten and Jönsson, 2010; Shin, 2011). Consequently, the field needs in-depth qualitative research, clearly linked to gender theory, into how existing mobility discrepancies between women and men are created in the everyday life context.

Against this background, this article examines negotiations in the household in order to understand the construction of gendered work travel differences and their consequences for the daily lives of women and men. Special attention is paid to gender relationships, highlighting

E-mail address: [ana.gilsola@geography.gu.se](mailto:ana.gilsola@geography.gu.se).

the role of “gender contracts” (a concept introduced by Hirdman, 1990, 1993, 2003) in the household. The study explicitly addresses one main research question: How do cohabiting women and men argue about, negotiate, and respond to their shared and individual needs and claims related to their commuting, embedded in daily life? Focusing on household negotiations, this study uniquely illuminates how differences found significant in statistical studies (e.g., as regards mode use, commuting distance, and household responsibilities) relate to different strategies and schemes in various households. The analysis introduces the concept of household gender contract to the research field of gendered travel and everyday life. In doing so, it demonstrates how work- and family-related factors shaping work travel are also mediated by individuals' diverse perceptions of gender relationships and associated practices.

The next section presents current research exploring commuting differences between women and men. The theoretical approach of the study is then presented, focusing on the concept of gender contract. The following section describes the empirical investigation, an in-depth interview study of 20 parents of small children, parents who were highly skilled participants in specialized labour markets and had recently moved to new residences. Finally, the results are presented and analysed, leading to the final discussion and conclusions.

## 2. Theoretical context

### 2.1. State of the research

This section introduces current research exploring differences in work travel between women and men, focusing on areas central to respondent narratives. In general, women commute shorter distances than do men in Sweden and elsewhere. This is usually explained with reference to factors such as gender differences in household responsibility, labour market (gender) segregation, and gender differences in travel mode (emphasizing the car) use (e.g., Hjorthol, 2008; Rapino and Cooke, 2011; Sandow, 2008; Schwanen, 2011).

Previous research into the role of *household responsibility* demonstrates that women's dual roles as mothers and wage earners heavily constrain their time use and activity space (e.g., Kwan, 1999), demanding specific strategies to cope with everyday life, strategies such as trip chaining or doing errands near home (MacDonald, 1999; cf. McGuckin and Nakamoto, 2005; Nobis and Lenz, 2005; Wang, 2015). In the Swedish context, studies demonstrate that the presence of children in a household geographically increases men's, but not women's, commuting (Gil Solá, 2013) or reduces women's commuting more than men's (Sandow, 2008). Furthermore, the presence of children reduces women's time expenditure for commuting while increasing men's (Gil Solá, 2013). Similarly, parents of small children may adjust their working hours to achieve a work–life balance. In a Nordic context, women often go down to part-time work when having children, while men do so to a substantially lesser degree (Hjorthol and Vågane, 2014; Statistics Sweden, 2014). This also affects household negotiations regarding the internal distribution of household work tasks.

Concerning the *labour market*, one important aspect is gender differences in earnings. Women's lower earnings are generally associated with reduced incentives to commute far from home to seek employment (Iwata and Tamada, 2014). Consequently, in Sweden, long-distance commuting pays off more in terms of economic benefits for men than for women (Sandow and Westin, 2010). Furthermore, in Sweden and Norway, women commute shorter distances than do men even when earning similar incomes (Gil Solá, 2013; Hjorthol and Vågane, 2014). Another labour-related reason for existing mobility discrepancies between the sexes is the spatial segmentation of workplaces, as women's main workplaces are located nearer residential areas and central parts of the city more often than are men's (Gil Solá, 2013; Hanson and Pratt, 1988; Sang et al., 2011).

A third important aspect determining the activity space of women and men is *access to a car* (cf. Dobbs, 2005). In Sweden and elsewhere,

men travel by car more often than do women (Gil Solá and Vilhelmson, 2012; Hjorthol, 2008; Vance et al., 2005). Focusing on Swedish cohabiting households having one car, the car is used for the woman's commuting in 30% of households and for the man's in 54%, meaning that the only car is used for men's commuting almost twice as often (Gil Solá, 2013). Generally, both affective and instrumental motives explain gender differences in car use (Jakobsson Bergstad et al., 2011). Steg (2005) demonstrates that men value the symbolic function of car use more than women do. Such affective motives are related to the car as a technical artefact and associated gender identity shaping processes (Balkmar and Joelsson, 2012; Polk, 1998). In addition, environmental awareness influences car use in a gendered way, for example, as women are more inclined to accept policies to reduce car use (Matthies et al., 2002; McCright and Dunlap, 2011; Polk, 2003, 2004).

Considering the more instrumental causes, income has a gendered influence on car use: when salaries increase, men's commuting by car increases while women's hardly changes (Gil Solá, 2013). On the other hand, car use is found to be positively correlated to mothers' nursing their children, which is linked to conceptions of what constitutes good mothering (Murray, 2008; Schwanen, 2011). This leads to smaller gender differences in car trip frequency and distance in households with children than in households without children (Fults and Börjesson, 2010; Scheiner and Holz-Rau, 2012; Vance et al., 2005). Focusing on household negotiations, Maat and Timmermans (2009) analyse car use in dual-earner households with one car, suggesting that, in particular, it is circumstances relating to the man that determine which spouse will use the car for commuting.

Although the car is an important travel mode for women and men in the studied area (Gil Solá and Vilhelmson, 2012), other modes may be preferred for work travel. Public transport could be a favoured alternative for longer commutes, as it allows time for resting or work during the commute, or for adjustment between work and private life (Fahlén, 2013; Gripsrud and Hjorthol, 2012; Jain and Lyons, 2008; Watts and Urry, 2008). As for the car, use of public transport is gendered in the studied region (City of Gothenburg et al., 2007). This could be related to men's greater willingness to pay for more rapid mobility (Sjöstrand, 2001) or to the spatial distribution of workplaces in relation to transport infrastructure (Eldér et al., 2012; Gil Solá, 2013). Importantly, preference for public transport is related to how appropriate the mode is for the specific trip, for instance, in terms of problem-free trip-chaining and the schedule on a given day (Friberg et al., 2004). For instance, Wheatley (2014) demonstrates that car-commuting women report higher levels of satisfaction with work than do women travelling by public transport. Research is unclear, however, regarding the role of mode use in travel satisfaction and subjective wellbeing (c.p. Eriksson et al., 2013; Jakobsson Bergstad et al., 2010).

To better understand women's and men's commuting decisions, it is also important to investigate the perceived *consequences* of commuting for the individual. One consequence is that male long-distance, or mobile, commuters,<sup>1</sup> more often than female ones, consider themselves to benefit from commuting in terms of improved career opportunities and higher income (Collet and Dauber, 2010). In contrast, the positive aspects of commuting highlighted by women are maintaining social relationships with family and friends, staying in one's residential area, and one's children remaining in their familiar local environment. Female long-distance commuters more often than male ones feel time pressure, depression, tiredness, exhaustion, and loneliness (Collet and Dauber, 2010; Roberts et al., 2011). These negative experiences are not explained by lower incomes or shorter working hours, but by the fact that women have greater household workloads and responsibility for

<sup>1</sup> This study differentiates between *mobile* and *non-mobile commuters*. Mobile commuters have changed residential locations, have long commutes (i.e., more than one hour each way at least three times a week), or often stay overnight (at least 60 nights per year) (Limmer et al., 2010). Here the term *long-distance commuter* is used instead of *mobile commuter*.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7485402>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7485402>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)