



# Contact between parents and adult children: The role of time constraints, commuting and automobility



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## ABSTRACT

Recent developments suggest that the need for contact between parents and adult children is expected to grow, while paid labour is re-organized to include more flexible work schedules and locations. In parallel we view a pressure to increase sustainable mobility through reducing car driving. Against this background, this paper addresses the question: to what extent the frequency of contact between parents and their adult children living out of home is associated with time allocated to work, including commuting time, and with automobility? Face-to-face and telecommunication based contact is considered. Regression analysis of survey data collected in the Netherlands was performed and results suggest that face-to-face contact was significantly associated with work and commute duration, car ownership, car commuting and distance. Telecommunication based contact was mainly associated with work duration, degree of urbanization and distance. Automobility seemed to be more important for women than for men. The policy implication is a potential trade-off between policies that aim at strengthening sustainable mobility behaviour and policies that lead to an increase in the reliance on informal care.

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## 1. Introduction

Does it matter whether people have a car and how much time they spend on work for how often they see their parents? Whether face-to-face or technology mediated, contact between parents and their adult children is an important component of family solidarity: it facilitates the exchange of instrumental and emotional support and the generation of social capital (Astone et al., 1999; Furstenberg, 2005; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Smith, 1998). Despite changes in circumstances over the life course contact is usually continuously maintained, for example because of feelings of obligation, reciprocity and mutual interest (Connidis, 2010; Grundy, 2005; Lee et al., 1994; Lye, 1996). In many countries it is expected that the importance of children as part of the social network of the elderly will increase, due to the parallel trends of the ageing of society and the decline of the amount of services provided by the state (for the Netherlands: Sadiraj et al., 2009). This likely increase in the need for contact is accompanied by changes in other domains that influence the opportunities for contact. A development with a potentially significant impact is the growing flexibility of work arrangements: the traditional separation of work and leisure is eroding in terms of when and where work is performed, especially with the advance of information technologies (Breedveld, 1998; Hilbrecht et al., 2013; Milts & Täht, 2010; Presser et al., 2008). Because of the centrality of work in many lives, changes in working hours, work location and commuting patterns are

likely to introduce opportunities and constraints for contacts between parents and their adult children.

The developments in the family and in the work domains are closely linked to travel mobility, defined here as the means that allows individuals to combine geographically dispersed activities. Contact between parents and their adult children can take place either in the home of the parents or the children, at a third location or by using telecommunication. It is therefore likely that mobility will have an important role in the individual and household decision making process on how to join such contact with work related activities. The expected changes in the needs, constraints and opportunities for intergenerational contact discussed so far call for a closer look at the relationship between work, family and mobility.

In terms of its mobility requirements, maintaining contact with parents has two important features: first, it is a rather flexibly scheduled activity, which can take place not only during the week but also on weekends, and at different times during the day, and second, it is in many cases viewed as a social obligation. In this respect, the relationship between contact and automobility in particular is of central interest. The car is a flexible means of transport that may substantially expand the individuals' time-space prism in time geography terms and enable them to join work and necessary social contact in their daily lives. The potential implications of these features for society are a conflict between the different goals of pursuing sustainable mobility by reducing car use and enabling people to fulfil their caring obligations. More insight into

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the role of automobility in intergenerational contacts might help find ways of better dealing with this potential conflict.

The main research question of this paper is therefore to what extent the frequency of contact between parents and their adult children living out of home is associated with time allocated to work, including commuting time, and with automobility. I define automobility as having a car available and commuting to work by car. Previous studies on social contact and mobility indicated that spending more time on work-related activities reduces the frequency of social contact (e.g. Van den Berg et al., 2013). A drawback of these studies is that often no differentiation was made between types of social relationships, such as those with friends, siblings or parents, although it has been demonstrated that significant differences exist among these types of contact (Mok et al., 2010). This lack of distinction thus far prevented researchers from addressing specific features of intergenerational contact, such as its relatively flexible but obligatory nature, which have implications for the derived travel behaviour, especially for the role of the car. While individuals may choose with whom from their friends' circle they wish to keep in touch, when it comes to contact with parents they do not have alternatives. They are required to fit this activity into their schedule using the time budget and mobility resources available to them. A contribution of this paper is the specific focus on family contact as one of the most central social relationships individuals have. The paper also contributes to the prolific family sociology literature on intergenerational contact by including the geographical context and (auto-)mobility which in general are not considered in the analysis.

To address the research question I used the first wave of the Mobility in Social Networks module, survey data collected in 2009 in the Netherlands. This module is part of the Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social sciences (LISS) panel administered by CentERdata. I estimated ordered probit regression models to estimate frequency of face-to-face and telecommunication based contact between parents and their adult children.

## 2. Background

Time geography is a conceptual framework that relates human activity with two main dimensions, namely time and space (Hägerstrand, 1970). With a daily 24 h time budget, individuals participate in activities based on their ability to move between locations in a timely manner. Of particular importance here are two sets of constraints that individuals must negotiate in their daily lives: first, capability constraints, from which the locations accessible to a person given the speed he or she can travel are derived. Secondly, coupling constraints, which define the ability to participate in activities that involve other individuals or organizations, and thus require the coordination of schedules. Obligatory activities that are fixed in time and space, such as full time office work, limit the choice set of other activities a person can take part in. All secondary, more flexible activities like socializing with family and friends, are scheduled given the temporal-spatial constraints imposed by those fixed activities – the person needs enough time left for the activity and the physical ability to get there on time (Neutens et al., 2011; Schwanen et al., 2008). For employed individuals work is the most time exhausting activity of the day and longer working hours naturally reduce the time budget for doing other things. This is especially true for rather flexible social activities (Golob & McNally, 1997).

Another relevant approach towards work and family related activities originates in psychological research on family and work interfaces. Time spent on work exerts what Voydanoff (2005) terms time-based demands and strain-based demands on the individual, while commuting exerts what she terms boundary-spanning demands. Time-based demands basically mean that time spent on work is subtracted from total available time. Strain-based demands are “the psychological spill-over” from work into family life, as is for example the stress caused at work which might impact family relationships. Boundary-spanning demands stem from the linkages of work and family and the lack of clear

separation between the two. It has been previously shown that time individuals spend on work and on commuting is negatively associated with various indicators of the quality of *intra*-household family life. For example in the US, long working hours of men were negatively associated with time spent with spouse and with the quality of father-adolescent relationship (Crouter et al., 2001). In Sweden being a long distance commuter has been found to be associated with a higher probability of separation (Sandow, 2013). Work hours and commuting time have been found to be positively associated with work-to-family conflict (Voydanoff, 2005).

Derived from the two above mentioned approaches the straightforward hypothesis is that work and commute duration would be negatively associated with frequency of contact between parents and their children (Hypothesis 1). However because telecommunication based contact is less time consuming as it does not involve travel, it is hypothesized that the effect of work and commute duration would be smaller for this type of contact. It should be noted that the link between the duration of work related activities and family life is not as trivial as it may seem. Work hours were repeatedly found not to be associated with amount of care provided by children to parents (Dautzenberg et al., 2000; Starrels et al., 1995). A suggested mechanism is of time re-allocation from lower priority activities into activities of greater importance. For example in the case of mothers, the increase in their labour market participation (in terms of out-of-home work hours) appeared not to have resulted in a decrease in time they spent on childcare (Bianchi, 2000).

Although time spent at work is an important indicator of time budget constraints, one needs to differentiate between individuals working the same amount of time but under different arrangements, specifically those who work from home and those who do not. This distinction is important in light of the increase in the share of individuals who work at least partially from home or have other flexible work arrangements (Alexander et al., 2010; de Graaff & Rietveld, 2007). Working from home shortens the transition time from work-related to other activities. Therefore it is hypothesized that it would be positively associated with frequency of contact (Hypothesis 2). Reduction of commuting time to practically zero is one of the benefits. But it might also burden participation in social activities by blurring the work-leisure separation (Voydanoff, 2005), which might negatively impact social contact in general and contact with parents in particular.

A central concept in time-geography is the time-space prism (Hägerstrand, 1970) which illustrates the potential geographic area accessible to individuals for participation in activities, given their location, duration, and speed of travelling. All activities are taking place within this prism. The prism expands when potential travelling speed increases and shrinks when speed decreases. Access to mobility resources, like car availability, increases the potential activity space and allows the individual to connect activities that occur remotely from each other by travelling within an acceptable time (Bertolini & le Clercq, 2003; Handy, 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2000). Face-to-face contact with parents frequently occurs in locations, like at the home of the parents (Rubin et al., 2014), that without a car might not be within the daily activity prism. It is therefore hypothesized that having a car in the household would be positively associated with frequency of face-to-face contact but not with telecommunication based contact (Hypothesis 3).

Having considered commute time and car availability, one also needs to pay attention to the regular use of cars in the daily lives of commuters. A person who drives to work may find it easier to chain other activities before or after it. Individuals that drive to work were also found to be more likely to use the car for in-home visiting of parents and siblings (Rubin et al., 2014). From this perspective it is hypothesized that commuting by car would be positively associated with frequency of face-to-face contact but not with telecommunication based contact (Hypothesis 4). However an ongoing debate takes place among scholars on whether the inherent characteristics of car usage as an activity performed frequently in solitude might generate negative impacts on the

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