



# Conceptualising business mobilities: Towards an analytical framework



Andrew Jones\*

School of Arts and Social Sciences, City University London, Northampton Square, London EC1V 0HB, United Kingdom

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 9 February 2013

Received in revised form 16 August 2013

Accepted 29 August 2013

Available online 1 October 2013

### Keywords:

Business travel

Mobility

Conceptual framework

Managerial practices

## ABSTRACT

Existing research into business travel and mobility within the social sciences has largely focused on measurement and the identification of patterns to this phenomenon. However, a growing body of research has also identified the complex nature of and reasons behind business mobility. It is clear that business travel fulfils many different functions and the drivers behind it vary considerably between industry, job role and organizational context. This contributes to a lack of clarity in definition of the concept and a blurring with non-economic forms of mobility. In this respect, theories of business mobility provide limited assistance for transportation management practice. This paper seeks to address this, arguing for a much more nuanced analytical framework through which to understand the differential nature of business travel and mobility in the contemporary globalizing economy. It engages critically with the existing literature, arguing that existing typologies of business mobility are insufficient to fully understand how mobility is related to economic success at both the firm and regional economy levels. It goes on to propose a reformulated typology and furthermore argue for the utility of a practice-centred and outcome-oriented theoretical approach that will enable better understanding and management of business mobility.

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## 1. Introduction

Debates about the nature of travel and mobility in relation to economic (business) activity in today's increasingly globalized economy have become more developed in recent years (Beaverstock, Derudder, Faulconbridge, & Whitlox, 2010; Sassen, 1999), but there is both ambiguity and diversity in what business travel or mobility is understood to be, why it occurs and its nature and significance to the success of economic activity. The importance of business travel and a variety of forms of mobility have been established in relation to both economic actors such as firms, and also to economic entities such as urban or regional economies (Taylor, Derudder, & Witlox, 2007; Wickham & Vecchi, 2009). On the one hand, as firms and industries have internationalised in recent decades, the significance of mobile workers and mobile working practices has been identified around a substantial range of essential elements to this process (Merten, Steinart, & Teufel, 2010). Business mobility relates to a wide range of corporate functions including managerial control, the acquisition, retention and development of business activity, employee training and the maintenance of organizational coherence – to name just a few dimensions to this activity (Davidson & Cope, 2003; Jones, 2003, 2010; Morrisson, Ladig, & Hsieh, 1994). The question of understanding the nature and significance of business mobility to firms in all sectors of the global economy is thus increasingly pressing.

Developing more coherent conceptualisations of business mobility is also important in furthering understanding of a wider range of trajectories in global economic development. From the perspective of understanding the prospects for global city economies or leading regions in the global economy, it is quite clear that accessibility and integration into global transportation systems has been essential. Business mobility is more than just a question of the socio-cultural and organizational dimensions that surround employee movement; it is intrinsically bound up in material and informational technologies, transport systems and a vast array of infrastructure (Beaverstock et al., 2010; Bender & Stephenson, 1998). Governments frequently cite business mobility as a key factor in planning and investment decisions around transport infrastructure – airports, high speed rail, road networks and mass transit systems (Banister & Berechman, 1999; Hovhannisyan & Keller, 2011). Clearly the overall drivers behind the development of these material investments in urban and regional infrastructure are multi-faceted and complex, relating to multiple dimensions to global connectivity beyond the direct needs of globalizing firms and industries. Personal mobility is increasingly caught up in wider globalization processes that exist in an increasingly connected global society – whether that is cultural diasporas, kinship networks, tourism and leisure (Urry, 2007). However, in current social scientific debates, there is a lack of clarity as to what constitutes business as opposed to leisure (or indeed other forms) of mobility, and evidence that personal mobility often encapsulates both economic and non-economic functions during a period of travel (Hankinson, 2005; Kellerman, 2010). The existing literature also reveals an enormous diversity of different forms and functions to business mobility, both within and

\* Tel.: +44 207 040 3940.

E-mail address: andrew.jones@city.ac.uk.

between firms, which presents an ongoing challenge in trying to develop a more generalised conceptual approach to the phenomenon.

The purpose of this paper is to seek to address this challenge, and in so doing argue that existing theoretical approaches to business mobility – whilst valuable – have important limitations in their capacity to better understand both the nature and significance of mobility practices for firms and economies. At the heart of this is the proposition that whilst the existing literature has done an excellent job of developing categorical typologies of mobility practices, it has not invested enough attention in analysing the differential importance of different types of mobility practices and – just as crucially – has tended to under-theorise the interrelationships and overlap between different mobility practices. This contention is not intended as a strong critique of the growing body of work – based on well-grounded empirical research – which has informed these typological frameworks, but rather as a constructive engagement aimed at building on their insights and augmenting their typological approaches with a greater theoretical capacity to understand the complexity of the increasing importance of business mobility in today's global economy. In this respect, the paper draws together and develops the existing conceptual literature to propose a reformulated typology of business mobility that overcomes some of the existing inconsistencies and absences in current frameworks. It then argues that this reformulated typology needs to be supplemented with a new theoretical approach that seeks to identify and analyse the nature of the outcomes associated with different mobility practices – as well as how practice are interrelated. By doing this, more effective and nuanced theories of business mobility can be developed.

The remainder of this paper develops these arguments in a series of sections. In the next part of the paper, existing (interdisciplinary) social scientific approaches to business travel and mobility are examined. This includes an evaluation of the theories that have been developed to account for the rise in business mobility in the global economy, including both the complex nexus of processes driving this rising mobility as the global economy has become increasingly integrated, and the technological and material developments that have facilitated it. The question of how business mobility might be defined is also addressed, giving consideration to the challenges this presents. The third part of the paper then moves on to consider in depth the typology-based approaches that have been developed in the social scientific literatures, and explores their limitations. Using this analysis, it goes on to propose a reformulated set of criteria for defining business mobility as a set of practices which is used in the fourth part of the paper to develop an alternative practice-oriented theoretical approach that seeks to foreground the outcomes of business mobility practices as a conceptual tool. The fifth part of the paper then considers the utility that this approach may have for business managers, corporate strategists and policy makers. The paper concludes by outlining the potential wider benefits of a practice-centred and outcome-oriented future direction for research into business mobility.

## 2. Existing theories of business travel and mobility

The overarching context for increasing contemporary business mobility and travel are the wider processes of economic globalization of recent decades. These processes have a range of dimensions discussed by social scientists which includes – but is not limited to – the internationalisation of industries, firms and markets (Scholte, 2005). Much of the existing social science literature that has specifically engaged with business travel and mobility frames its analysis with respect to these broader debates about the nature of global economic integration. However, the literature falls across several disciplines and schools of work, many of which are grounded in specific approaches to empirical research. Broadly, research into business travel and mobility can be found across sociology, economics, management studies, human geography, transport planning, tourism and urban studies (Abdelghany & Abdelghany, 2007; Beaverstock et al., 2010; Doyle & Nathan, 2001; Kulendran and Wilson, 2000; Mason &

Gray, 1995; McDowell, 2007). However, the body of research is not uniformly extensive within these disciplinary areas, with business travel being the subject of considerable literature in transport and planning and (to a lesser extent) management studies, but relatively small literature in economics, sociology or human geography. Business mobility is also often analysed as part of a wider set of research questions within different disciplines concerned variously with, for example, strategies for global human resource management (Dowling & Welch, 2004; Jenkins, 1993), urban transport planning policy (Kulendran & Witt, 2003; Lian & Denstadli, 2004), transnational corporate form (Jones, 2010; Wickham & Vecchi, 2008) or the nature of increasing human mobility (Salt, 2010; Urry, 2007). In that respect, rather than approach the existing work through a disciplinary lens, this section seeks to group together different bodies of literature that address business travel and mobility around broader theoretical debates that straddle many of the social sciences disciplines discussed. This reflects the way that questions of business travel and mobility have often become investigated as subsidiary aspects of wider debates around economic development, global city networks, transport and planning policy or global organizational management. The remainder of this section thus identifies three aspects to existing approaches: research into the patterns of growth in business mobility; how the drivers and facilitators of increasing business mobility in the contemporary world have been identified and theorised, and the wider definitional and conceptual challenges that emerge from the literature in developing a more comprehensive theorisation of the phenomenon.

### 2.1. The growth of business mobility

Across the social sciences, there is a range of work that establishes significant growth in business travel and mobility in recent decades, and particularly in the phase of globalization of the last forty years or so. The primary empirical data sources which establish this are air, rail and road travel passenger datasets which many governments collect in one form or another, along with a smaller body of research that has examined travel practices within industries and firms (Dowling & Welch, 2004; Salt, 2010; Welch, Welch & Worm, 2007). Mobility in terms of journeys worldwide has increased dramatically both within and between countries, and a range of international, national, industry and firm level research provides evidence that a significant fraction of this is related to economic activity (as opposed to travel for other reasons including tourism and leisure) (c.f. Brons, 2002; Swarbrooke & Horner, 2001). However, beyond these broad trends, specific patterns of business mobility within regions and national economies are much less well understood.

Existing research has thus tended to focus on specific geographical areas or modes of transport, largely because of the nature of available datasets. Several strands in the literature are notable in informing current understanding of increased business mobility. Firstly, air travel passengers across the globe have been on an upward trend, the effects of economic downturns notwithstanding. In 2011, EU air travel numbers had reached 777 million (Eurostat, 2012) and just over 800 million journeys in North America, an increase of around 100 million passenger from a decade previously (RITA, 2012). However, such aggregate data reveals only a limited insight into the component of such travel that qualifies as business air travel. Research has established growth in business air travel at both the European and north American scales, as well as changing patterns of business mobility in these regions (Bender & Stephenson, 1998; Derudder, Devriendt, van Nuffel, & Witlox, 2010; Mason & Gray, 1995).

Secondly, in the transportation studies literature, there is evidence for increasing business mobility in a range of shorter distance modes of transport (Millard-Bell & Schipper, 2011). In terms of both rail and automobile business travel, research in Europe demonstrates growing activity in recent decades (OECD Transport, 2010). Finally, at the level of the firm, research within management studies, human resource management and economic geography has found increasing mobility

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