RESEARCH ARTICLE

The commuter family as a geographical adaptive strategy for the work–family balance

Marjolijn van der Klis* and Lia Karsten

Amsterdam Institute for Metropolitan and International Development Studies, University of Amsterdam, Nieuwe Prinsengracht 130, 1018 VZ Amsterdam, the Netherlands

(Received 21 June 2008; final version received 30 November 2008)

In this paper we raise the question of how commuter families create a work–family balance in a situation of incongruity of the geographical scales of work and family. Commuter families combine the work location of a commuting parent on the (inter)national scale, with the home-based parent’s work location and the family home on the local scale. The commuting parent experiences a compartmentalized workweek, while the home-based parent is a single parent on those days. The results indicate two types of work–family balance. In the traditionalizing type, the father concentrates full time on paid work and the mother is the family caregiver both when the father is at work and at home. In the egalitarian type, both parents participate in paid work for at least four days a week. Family care in these egalitarian families is coordinated by the home-based parent (female or male) and shared by both parents during the weekends. The work–family balance of a commuter family involves some sacrifice, but also substantial enrichment. The empirical evidence is derived from a small-scale data set of 30 in-depth interviews with both parents in 15 commuter families in the Netherlands.

Keywords: commuter family; family adaptive strategy; incongruity of geographical scales; mobility; work–family balance

Dans cette communication, nous examinons la façon dont les familles de navetteurs de longue distance parviennent à un équilibre entre famille et travail dans une situation où les échelles géographiques de la vie professionnelle et de la vie familiale sont discordantes. Ces familles de navetteurs de longue distance s’organisent entre le lieu de travail du parent navetteur à l’échelle (inter)nationale et celui du parent restant au domicile familial à l’échelle locale. Le parent navetteur connaît une semaine de travail très compartimentée, alors que le parent basé au domicile familial forme avec les enfants une famille monoparentale lorsque le navetteur est absent. Les résultats indiquent deux types d’équilibre entre travail et famille. Dans le type traditionaliste, le père se consacre à temps plein sur son activité professionnelle et la mère s’occupe de la famille aussi bien quand le père est au travail que quand il est à la maison. Dans le type égalitaire, les deux parents exercent une profession au moins quatre jours par semaine. Les travaux domestiques dans ces familles égalitaires sont coordonnés par le parent basé au domicile familial – que ce soit le père ou la mère – et sont partagés par les deux parents pendant les week-ends. L’équilibre entre travail et famille dans les familles de navetteurs de longue distance demande quelques sacrifices, mais s’accompagne aussi d’un enrichissement certain. Les données empiriques ont été

*Corresponding author. Email: m.van.der.klis@scp.nl

ISSN 1366-8803 print/ISSN 1469-3615
© 2009 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/13668800902966372
http://www.informaworld.com
Introduction

Post-industrial societies are undergoing a process of geographical scaling up. Structural shifts have contributed to a growth of mobility of people (Hardill, 2004; Larsen, Urry, & Axhousen, 2006; McDowell, 2006; Scott, 2006; Urry, 2004). In economic respects, the need is increasing for highly skilled workers who are willing to be mobile over long distances (Börsch-Supan, 1990). Technological improvements, such as in communication technology, enable companies and individuals to engage in global networks, which increases the social desire and need for individuals to be internationally mobile (Castells, 1996; Favell, Feldblum, & Smith, 2006). Geopolitical shifts, such as the European Schengen Treaty, which allows the unhindered travel of individuals within the European Union, have set crucial preconditions for the scaling up of mobility (Ackers, 1998), as does the growth in means for (cheap) long-distance travel (Favell et al., 2006), for instance, through budget airlines and high-speed rail networks.

Parallel to these structural shifts, the doctrine that both men and women should undertake paid labour in order to be full participants in society has gained support (Dermott, 2005; McDowell, 2006). This principle has promoted a strong growth in dual-earner households and has resulted in a complexity of balancing paid work and the organization of daily family life (Droogleever Fortuijn, 1993; Fagnani, 1993; Green, 1995; Hardill, Green, & Dudleston, 1997; Hochschild, 1997; Jarvis, 2005; Karsten, 2003). The flexible economy and the related time demands of work, not least commuting time, have severe consequences for (the quality of) family time (Becker & Moen, 1999; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Hardill et al., 1997; Hochschild, 1997; McDowell, 2006).

While work has undergone a scaling-up process from the local environment in the vicinity of the family home to the regional or even (inter)national scale, family care and the everyday practices of family life still take place predominantly on the local scale (Hardill, 2004; Jarvis, 2007; McDowell, 2006). All kinds of geographical adaptive strategies have evolved by which families seek to meet both the local time-space demands of care and – in time-geographical respects – the more dispersed occupational claims that rest on households (Brannen, 2005; Hanson & Pratt, 1988; Hochschild, 1997; Jarvis, 1999, 2005; Moen & Wethington, 1992).

At the same time, the nuclear family, with all family members living together in one shared home, is still the predominant definition of family (Degler, 1980). In their study of dual-career commuter marriages in the USA, Gerstel and Gross (1984) criticize this narrow definition as a one-sided view that does not represent the lives of all families in post-industrial countries. For some families, the geographically dispersing pulls of work and family have led to a relatively new geographical adaptive strategy: the commuter family. In commuter families, one parent lives near his or her work for part of the time and away from the communal family home, because the commuting distance is too great to travel on a daily basis. This household
arrangement enables parents to seize distant work opportunities and preserve solid local roots for family life (Gerstel & Gross, 1984; Green, Hogarth, & Shackleton, 1999a, 1999b; Van der Klis, 2008; Van der Klis & Mulder, 2008). Commuting families (usually) divide parenting responsibilities between spouses not on a daily basis, but in weekly timeframes. While the spouse who lives in the family home (the home-based parent) becomes a part-time single parent, the spouse who leaves the family home for work (the commuting parent) combines long-distance parenting during workdays with membership of the part-time nuclear family during weekends. This geographical household strategy raises questions about how commuter families create a work–family balance in a situation of a geographical incongruity of the scales of work and family life. We elaborate on this issue with the relevant literature in the next section. The empirical part of this paper is based on 30 in-depth interviews with both the home-based parents and the commuting parents in 15 commuter families in the Netherlands.

Literature

In the literature on the concept of work–family balance, several views are put forward regarding the gains and losses of dual-earner strategies. Sacrifices in the domain of work for the benefit of family life, especially among working mothers, have been studied extensively (Bonney & Love, 1991; Cooke, 2001; Hardill, 2002; Heinz & Kruger, 2001). Some authors emphasize that speaking of a work–family balance is misleading, because it suggests a state of equilibrium between the domains of work and family that does not usually exist (Holmes, 2004). It is also pointed out that the politics of time are personalized; finding a work–family balance is a widespread societal problem, but every family takes it to be their private dilemma and seeks individual strategies (Hochschild, 1997). Other researchers emphasize that, on the individual level, combining work and family roles brings not only conflict, but also enrichment. Conditions and experiences in one role can influence the performances of the other in a positive way that makes these roles ‘allies’ rather than ‘enemies’ (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006).

One point is clear in the literature: home and work cannot be treated as separate spheres (Hanson & Pratt, 1988). They compete for the same scarce time of individuals and families. Work orientations have consequences for caring options and vice versa. The frequently experienced tensions between work and family also relate to different interpretations of the ethics of work and care. The international literature indicates that the quality of care is not measured in time allocation, whereas the quality of work is (Brannen, 2005). Even though time management is an important factor in care tasks, the amount of time spent with children is not an indication of commitment to children and family (Dermott, 2005). In the Netherlands, however, the motherhood ideal has historically been focused on maximizing self-care for children and minimizing the time children spend in formal childcare. Today, this ideal is still firmly anchored in the Netherlands and it adds to a dominant work–family balance in which mothers work part-time jobs, also among the highly skilled (Portegijs, Cloën, Keuzenkamp, Merens, & Steenvoorden, 2008; Van Wel & Knijn, 2006). Mothers in the Netherlands generally experience this work–family balance as an enrichment of both working and personal lives. The national government is increasingly regarding the part-time culture as a societal problem,
both because these women are needed in the labor force and because the financial independence of women has become an important political issue (Portegijs et al., 2008).

In situations where there is a shortage of time for family life, the notion of quality time is applied (Brannen, 2005; Hochschild, 1997). Many working parents do indeed indicate that their role as a mother or father does not depend solely on time spent at home. Studies indicate that for working parents, good experiences at work have positive effects on family life, and conversely, that being happy at home makes one a more productive employee. This bidirectional influence is called work–family enrichment (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). What does this mean in the situation of a commuter parent who is satisfied about his/her work, but is away from home for part of the week and thus has only limited time for care? And for a home-based parent who combines work and care as a single parent for part of the time?

It is clear that the work–family balance in commuter families is different from that of the usual nuclear-residence dual-earner family. Commuter families avoid or postpone the migration of the entire family for the career of the commuting partner (Van der Klis, 2008). That could imply that the career prospects of the home-based parent are not disturbed. However, in their study of dual-location households in the UK, Green et al. (1999a) found that some mothers in dual-location families decided to cut their work hours down as a direct result of their choice of this household arrangement. The burden of the care tasks that the mother had to carry alone while the father was away increased considerably. Also, when the mother did not cut down in work hours because of the dual-location household, the care responsibilities lay with her alone for part of the time. This suggests gender inequality in commuter families similar to other geographical household arrangements, which confirms that even though egalitarian gender ideology may underlie this household arrangement, it is not a guarantee for an equal division of work and care (Becker & Moen, 1999; Hardill, 2002).

In the geographical literature, studies on balancing work and family draw on Hägerstrand’s time-space geography (1970). According to this, individuals have a multitude of roles that influence their daily activity patterns. Most of these activities cannot be fulfilled at the same time and/or place, which creates the need for people to travel between different locations. This traveling leads to paths that individuals cover in time and space; they are referred to as day-paths and week-paths.

Depending on the nature and number of activities to be covered and on the available mode of travel, the distances that an individual may cover per day or per week vary substantially. A range of geographical studies looks into (gendered) time-space strategies for balancing home and work, by integrating not only working hours, but also commuting time (Dijst, 1999; Droogleever Fortuijn & Karsten, 1989; Fanning Madden, 1981; Turner & Niemeier, 1997). Apart from traditional families where the male partner has the provider role (working on a local or regional scale) and the female partner is a full-time homemaker (local scale), we can distinguish several dual-earner time-space strategies for the Netherlands. Within dual-earner families, three different work–family strategies are discerned regarding the commuting distances and the allocation of time in the work–family balance. Firstly, the most dominant strategy in the Netherlands is that of the one-and-a-half working week (the regional/local type). One of the parents, usually the male, takes the traditional role of the primary breadwinner and is not restricted by care responsibilities in his
working hours or commuting time. The other parent, usually the female, is not career oriented and works part time, not more than two or three days a week, and often near the home in order not to lose too much time in commuting. This commitment enables her to combine work and care on a daily basis (Portegijs & Keuzenkamp, 2008). Secondly, there is a local/local type where both partners try to organize work and care on the same local scale without losing sight of a career. In the Netherlands this is the 4/4 couple (both couples work four days a week), predominantly located in highly urbanized areas where there are enough job opportunities for both partners within short traveling (cycling) distance (De Meester, Mulder, & Droogleever Fortuijn, 2007; Karsten, 2007). In their professional work orientation and the equal sharing of care, these families represent the Dutch emancipated ideal in which both parents combine financial independence with family care on an individual basis (Portegijs, Hermans, & Lalta, 2006). Thirdly, a regional/regional strategy is distinguished, in which both partners have demanding jobs on a regional scale, including long commuting times. This type of family does not occur frequently among households with children in the Netherlands (Statistics Netherlands, 2008).

In this paper, we focus on commuter families’ time-space strategies to balance work and family commitments. By definition, commuter families have in common a large physical distance between the workplace of one of the partners and the family locale. A longer commute that is not undertaken daily, can lead to a compartmentalizing of ‘home’ and ‘work’ for the commuting parent (Green et al., 1999b; Van der Klis & Karsten, 2009), because this parent is not available every day for caring activities in the family home. For the home-based parent, the commuter-family arrangement can lead to intensive juggling of home and work commitments on the single-parenting days. The questions that arise are: What are the strategies of commuter families in balancing work and family? What are the differences in terms of gender? What are the sacrifices and the enrichments of this specific work–family strategy?

Respondents and methods
Thirty parents in commuter families with one or more dependent children living in their household took part in this study. These commuter families are a subset of a larger set of 30 commuter couples, including 15 couples without dependent children. Owing to the absence of databases through which commuter families could be located and selected, we searched for respondents through networking, advertising, approaching companies, and the snowball method. We used purposive sampling (also known as theoretical sampling) for the selection of respondents (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Mason, 1996). We used a questionnaire (by telephone) to determine whether a family would fit within the framework of our study.

We sought a variety in the age groups of the children, in the distribution of paid work between the parents, in the types of occupation, and in the locations of the residential home and the commuting parent’s workplace. We limited the selection to people with moderate and higher skill levels. For the purpose of comparability of the respondents’ stories, we ruled out families for whom the time spent away from the communal residence was inherent in the type of profession, such as oilrig workers, truck drivers, travelling sales representatives, and naval officers.
Of the 15 families who took part in the research (see Table 1 for respondent characteristics), seven couples commuted between two residences within the Netherlands, and eight travelled between family homes in the Netherlands and residential locations abroad. These were mostly West European countries surrounding the Netherlands, such as the UK and Belgium (Brussels), but also Switzerland and one non-European country (Bolivia). Three families had children younger than four years old; in three other families the children were between 4 and 12 years old; in seven families the ages were 13–18; and in two families there were children in several age groups. Most families had one or two children. Some couples were still extending their family; in other cases, some of the grown-up children had already left the parental home. All the dependent children lived permanently in the family residence with the home-based parent. In three cases, the father was the home-based parent; in all other cases the mother was home based. The commuter residence (where the commuting parent lived during workdays) was not part of the children’s daily activity pattern. As a rule, the children only visited the commuter residence occasionally.

The selected 30 respondents all took part in semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interviews looked into practices and daily activities during the days of single parenting and the days when both parents were at the family home. The topics covered were family care, household activities, paid work, leisure time, partnership, and the experiences of sacrifice and enrichment. The individual interviews allowed both parents to reflect on their experiences from a personal angle. In order to enhance the comparability of the interview material, the same interviewer carried out all the interviews. Each of these lasted between 60 and 90 minutes; all were tape-recorded with the respondents’ consent and fully transcribed. The children were not interviewed, thus the children’s experiences that were brought to bear were filtered through their parents’ interpretations.

In the analysis we combined an etic approach (taking relevant themes from the literature) with an emic approach (working out the analysis in detail from issues that the respondents brought up). Coding, classifying, and summarizing were used to uncover structures in the interview material (Droogleever Fortuijn, 2002). In this paper, quotations are being used as noteworthy examples of the findings. To protect the privacy of the respondents we applied pseudonyms.

Results: two types of work–family balance

The practices of the commuter families show similarities and differences. All families function as a single-parent family for part of the time and as a dual-parent family for the rest of the time. Resulting from the selection criteria, the commuting parent in all the families works on the national or international scale, at a long distance from the family home. A finding that was not part of our selection criteria, however, was that all home-based parents work on the local scale, often within cycling distance of the family home. The close proximity of the home-based parent’s job to the family home turned out to be a common strategy among commuter families. Reducing commuting time to a minimum enables the home-based parents to keep their daily activity prism for combining work, care, and home containable. Julia, who is a home-based mother who lives and works in the center of Amsterdam, remarks:
Table 1. Biographical data of participating commuter families ($N = 30$ parents; 15 couples).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of couples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Travel variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of commuter family at time of interviews</td>
<td>&lt;1 year</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1–5 years</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt;5 years</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time that commuting parent spends at family home</td>
<td>Weekend (Friday evening through Sunday evening/Monday morning)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Long weekend (Thursday evening through Sunday evening/Monday morning)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weekend and an extra mid-week night</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Every second weekend</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Several weeks out of several months</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age category of children</td>
<td>&lt;4 years</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4–12 years</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13–18 years</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Combination of several age categories</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children (living at family home)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Home-based parent variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profession</td>
<td>Research/education</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Politics/government/not-for-profit</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commercial/business</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-employed/independent practitioner</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stay-at-home parent</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contracted work hours per week</td>
<td>0 hours (stay-at-home parent)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1–20 hours</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21–35 hours</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>36+ hours (full time)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Commuting parent variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profession</td>
<td>Research/education</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Politics/government/not-for-profit</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commercial/business</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-employed/independent practitioner</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contracted work hours per week</td>
<td>1–20 hours</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21–35 hours</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>36+ (full time)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country of residence near workplace</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other country (mostly European)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Well, if the company had been in [another city] I don’t know what I would have done. [...] I would have hated being in a hectic situation. For example, you might get stuck in traffic, and your child comes home from school, or something like that. [...] And of course also because Eric has an irregular schedule, and I can’t count on him in the sense of stability, of knowing when he will or will not be here, that is of course also important. After all, I am a single mother a large part of the time.

We discern two work–family strategies based on the division of paid work between both partners. Firstly, we distinguish a rather traditional gender division of paid work where the male partner takes the breadwinner role as the commuting parent and the female partner does not undertake many paid working hours, or none at all. However modern the phenomenon of the commuter family might be compared to the nuclear family, we call this first type the \textit{traditionalizing commuter family}.\footnote{Van den Berg and de Graaf 1998} Secondly, we distinguish the practice in which both parents meet the obligations of paid work on a principle of equality; both parents have demanding jobs for at least four days a week. We call this second type the \textit{egalitarian commuter family}, although in a strict sense a fully egalitarian balance is impossible for commuter families. In the discussion of both practices we look first at paid work and then consider the implications for family care and household responsibilities. Of the 15 commuter families in our analysis, six are traditional and nine employ egalitarian practices. It should be noted that this numerical distribution cannot be regarded as a representative distribution of all commuter families in the Netherlands, because of our method of respondent selection (discussed above). The merit of the findings is to be found in the elucidation of the related mechanisms sustaining a particular strategy.

\textit{Traditionalizing commuter families}

In the six traditionalizing commuter families, all the commuting parents are fathers and they are the primary breadwinners. They have full-time jobs, are usually away from home five days a week, and intensify their workdays with overtime. They have a strong role identification with their job. Some also bring work home during the weekends. The occupations of the commuting parents are mostly in commerce or business in high-end corporations, in which these men hold positions of high responsibility with demanding working hours.

When we look at the paid work of the home-based parents (all mothers), three have contracts for less than 20 hours a week and three others are stay-at-home homemakers. The working mothers chose their jobs to fit around the family obligations; the location of the job, the required number of work hours, and the flexibility of work hours came before the specific organization or the precise nature of the job. These mothers are in lower or higher vocational jobs or are freelancers. Those mothers who are not in paid employment are active in voluntary activities such as sports clubs. In these traditionalizing commuter families, the work–family strategy is very similar to that of nuclear-family households with a 1.5 income or a 1.0 income strategy. These respondents did not make significant changes to contracted or actual work hours when they started their commuter partnership. Their work–family balance was already such that the male parent had a demanding job that required long work hours and the female parent was primarily the homemaker. Any scaling back by the wife and scaling up in work hours by the husband to provide sufficient family income, had taken place when these couples
founded their family. This strategy was not related to their commuter-family arrangement. Both parents in these families feel that this household strategy of dividing paid work and family care between them works well. The new feature in these families is not the division of roles, but that the men’s career does not oblige wives and children to follow the husband to another residential location (Van der Klis & Mulder, 2008).

In these families, there is not so much juggling of work and home, because of the traditional gender division of labor. Usually, there is no hired help for household or caring tasks. The most significant change in the practice of family care brought about by the commuter-family arrangement is that, for several days a week, the fathers do not sleep at home. Their contribution to daily household tasks continues to be negligible, as before. Sarah (married to Mark and mother of two teenage sons and a baby boy) explains this:

Interviewer question: So, that’s more or less the division that you had from the start, that the domestic things are more your role?
Response: Yes. There’s no way he’s going to stand over a hot stove.

Interviewer question: . . . yes, I wanted to ask you about that, how do you divide the household tasks?
Response: I do them all.

Interviewer question: You do them all on your own?
Response: Yes. He has no idea about them, it’s also like, he can never find his things. Ties, for instance. Where’s my tie? Where’s my belt? Where are my shoes? In that sense, yes, I think that’s a man’s habit anyway, that they can never find stuff. But that is my responsibility. He’s not going to get the groceries, he certainly wouldn’t.

Interviewer question: . . . and cooking?
Response: No. No.

Both partners emphasize how important it is for the home-based parent to be a self-reliant person, meaning that the home-based parent cannot fall back on her partner for everyday decisions concerning the children or the household. ‘It must be said, for this arrangement you need to have a self-reliant partner. Because otherwise it would never work. Especially if you have children’ (Jack). ‘I was never very dependent, but because of this situation I’ve become very independent, and learnt to take care of everything on my own, and I guess that’s been positive. You become less dependent on someone else’ (Margaret, Jack’s wife).

The independence of the wives in managing life at home strikes a poor contrast, however, with their lack of financial self-reliance. The couples themselves experience the individual responsibility for family care as an enrichment, and the secondary importance of the mother’s paid work activities is not regarded as a sacrifice. In this traditionalizing commuter-family arrangement, the male spouse gains personally by pursuing a fulfilling work career. In his family role of financial provider, he makes sure the family has a pleasant life without having to uproot the children for the benefit of their father’s career. Mark (Sarah’s husband and father of three boys):

I told Sarah, listen girl, I make my money in the west [author’s note: the economic core of the Netherlands], the wages are different in the eastern part of the country, that’s just the way things are. So, if we want to live the way we do, then that requires a certain income, and I can only earn that in the west. So that is the price we have to pay. And of course that takes its toll on both of us, because I would prefer – let me make that very clear, and Sarah knows this too – to be home every day with her and the boys. And of course, we also have our baby, that’s such a special thing, such a wonderful boy. Yes, you would want...
to hold him and see him every day. At least, that’s how I feel about it. [...] On the other hand, you shouldn’t over-dramatize things, there are of course lots of men – because that’s more or less how the world is structured, pilots, truck drivers – who are simply not at home every night of the week.

The fathers’ absence during weeknights does of course have an impact on family life, especially on their relationship with the children. Interestingly, however, the relationship between these fathers and their children does not necessarily seem to deteriorate. Several fathers mention that, after an initial period of strongly reduced contact with their children, they came up with new ways of bonding. Some give each child a cell phone or email their children frequently. One father is even active in his son’s MSN network and both have webcams. Jack (father of three; the interview took place at the dining table in the family home):

I’ve given every child a phone in their bedroom and I call them. And the children are at their desks doing their homework and then the phone rings and apparently it’s a game to be the first to pick up the phone. And to be honest, at those moments I have a better connection with the children than when I am at home. At home it often goes like, I am sitting over here, three kids, and my wife over there, and then there are these conversations on Friday evenings, one story after another, and of course I can’t follow half of them, and then I ask about that, like, what’s that all about then? And then the children don’t feel like explaining it all, to tell the whole previous history again.

The stories of the fathers make it clear that, over time, the intensity of these contacts varies, depending on the children’s need for and interest in them. Although these fathers experience some sacrifice concerning family life, the commuter-family arrangement also brings enrichment in the father-child relationships. This finding indicates that the notion of ‘quality time’ can be realized if a parent makes an effort to give shape to the way in which time with children is spent, even when a parent is not physically present.

**Egalitarian commuter families**

The second practice of commuter families – both parents meet the obligations of paid work on a principle of equality – consists of nine households. These respondents’ occupations differ in type from those of traditionalizing commuter families. Among the egalitarian families, the occupations of both parents are mainly in the public sector (government, politics, not-for-profit, research, and education), some are self-employed and only a few are in business. Both parents are contracted for at least four days a week and most work full time (36 hours or more). These respondents have in common that they are in highly specialized, knowledge-based occupations that provide some room for flexible work hours or working from home for part of the time. We found some variations between couples in days spent on paid work. Independent of the number of contracted hours, some couples follow a 5/5 strategy (both parents work five days a week), and others a 4/4 strategy (both parents are actively engaged in paid work four days a week). The age of the children did not influence the strategy followed. We established that commuting parents with full-time contracts sometimes negotiate with their employer to compress their workweek into four intensified workdays, or that they arrange to work from home for part of the time. This concession ensures that they do not have to be away from
the family for more than four days a week. This enables the commuting parent to combine the heavy workload with significant responsibility in family care and household tasks. Delia’s is an example of a workweek compressed into four days:

A four-day workweek, when I still worked in the Netherlands I also had that . . . that leads to an adequately balanced week. […] Yes, that is a pleasant division in work time and non-work time. […] But here, when I am at work, I work absurdly long hours. You shouldn’t be allowed to write that down. I really work from nine in the morning until eleven or twelve at night. […] That is of course also because I don’t have anyone to go home to in the evening . . .

Some couples (4/4) have officially scaled their contracted hours back to four days a week to protect their family time. Intensifying the hours worked while away from the family home creates a feeling of living in two separate worlds for the commuting parents; they have a work life and a family life (Van der Klis & Karsten, 2009). From the work-life point of view, this compartmentalization is often experienced as an enrichment. It enables the commuting parents to focus on the job without the distractions of everyday family responsibilities. From the family perspective this compressing is by many also considered to be positive. It helps create more family time than just the bare minimum of the weekends. Rick and Paula apply a 4/4 work model; Rick is at the family home from Thursday evenings to Monday mornings. He does not bring work home. Rick remarks:

It’s terribly hectic if both have a fulltime job and two children. That is not to be recommended [laughter] […] A weekend of three days is substantially longer than a weekend of two days, you really notice the difference. So, that’s why I don’t take my day off in the middle of the week, like on a Wednesday.

On this issue Paula mentions:

It’s not only how often you’re there, but also what you are like when you are there. And it’s because we both work part-time. When Rick is here, then he’s completely here for three days. So yes, my own father used to come home every evening, but he left the house each morning at seven and returned in the evening at seven, and then he was tired. I think he was there for me less than Rick is there for our children.

A common factor in all the egalitarian commuter families is that they operate from the family philosophy that both parents have equal rights and responsibilities toward their employment careers and family care. Both want to combine a lifestyle of careerism with that of familism on an individual level (Bell, 1968; De Meester et al., 2007; Karsten, 2003; Van der Klis & Mulder, 2008). They both regard this combination as an enrichment of their lives. The equal division of paid work between partners forms the basis for a more or less equal division of care and household duties. In contrast with the traditionalizing families, the commuting parent picks up everyday household and care tasks on returning to the family home:

…it’s pleasant for the family, I take it, that I also do some things at home. I have a number of family tasks that are my responsibility. […] Yes, I have to keep the shed tidy, and I don’t always do that [laughter] […] and I do the grocery shopping for the entire week […] there are regular spots in the refrigerator and in the cupboards where I check if everything is there. But of course I’ve done that all my life. […] And I also do all the cooking when I am at home. Paula only cooks when I’m not there. She doesn’t like cooking, and I do. […] but I simply decide what food there is for the family for the whole week [laughter]. (Rick)
On the other days, when the home-based parent is in fact a single parent, some household and care responsibilities, like cleaning and childcare, are contracted out. In the families with teenagers, the children do substantial chores, such as cooking, helping out with the laundry, or keeping the house tidy. But teenagers also require substantial parenting time, although this is more about ‘being there’ than about ‘doing care’. Furthermore, as the children grow up, the parenting role towards the children becomes more complicated. At times, teenagers cling to their home-based parent and reject the parenting activities of the commuting parent with the reproach that this parent’s input is obviously not needed during the week, so why interfere during the weekend? The teenagers’ point of view (as explained by their parents) makes clear that, also in the egalitarian commuter family, the home-based parent (whether female or male) has the family-care coordinator role, both during the single-parenting days and when both parents are there. When we look at the time allocation of the commuter parents’ efforts at home, it is clear that they simply cannot compete with the home-based parents. The commuting parents are themselves aware of their shortcomings, particularly towards the children. In this respect they fear unexpected events that have an impact on the emotional well-being of their children. When asked about the most important sacrifice of their commuter-family arrangement, Rick responds:

The biggest disadvantage, uhm. . . . I guess that would be that you miss out on some things with the children that you would prefer to do together. You will always see that Daniel breaks up with his girlfriend and needs parental support at a moment when I’m not there, or something like that.

Both partners are very much aware of the delicate work–family balance, the unavoidable feelings of guilt, and the diplomatic skills required to continue their ideal of equality. Jenny (commuting mother of three-year-old Roxana):

You sometimes miss out on things. Like the other day we had Roxana’s first parent–teacher meeting at school. That was on a Tuesday when I was in Brussels. Well, then I can’t get on a plane just like that to be there, but that is a great pity. But Samuel is simply a wonderful husband, he makes sure I don’t feel shut out. We don’t use the situation against one another that is very important. He has told me countless times when I felt guilty: ‘hey, it’s all going fine, if there’s a problem I’ll let you know’. I think that it could lead to jealousy if the other person had to make a sacrifice. But luckily he enjoys taking care of Roxana. I think that neither of us feels that he has made a terrible sacrifice.

Indeed, home-based parents do not seem to consider their single parenting as a great sacrifice; rather, they feel their spouse, the commuting parent, makes significant sacrifices in missing part of family life. So they make it clear that they would not want to trade places and become the commuting parent themselves. Samuel (Jenny’s husband, home-based father of Roxana): ‘It’s all going very well; I feel I’ve been very lucky.’ Paula (mother of two teenagers): ‘I don’t think I would have liked to have the other role in this commuting. Not that I’m such a mothering animal, not at all, but I think I would find it very boring . . .’ We identify that part of the experienced sacrifices and enrichments result from comparing one’s individual situation with that of one’s spouse, which shows the context-based character of experiences of enrichment or sacrifice, and how they are relative to one’s frame of reference.
Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we addressed the question how commuter families create a work–family balance in a situation of geographical incongruity of the scales of work and family life. The empirical evidence presented is derived from a small-scale data set of 30 in-depth interviews with both the home-based parents and the commuting parents in 15 commuter families in the Netherlands.

Commuter families combine the work location of one parent on a large national or international scale with the other parent’s work location and the family home on a local scale. They bridge diverging geographical scales of work and home by creating a compartmentalized workweek for the commuting parent at a distant location. That arrangement distinguishes commuting couples from other working households. In the case of commuter families, in parallel with the compartmentalized workweek of the commuting parent, the home-based parent is tied up as a single parent, juggling work and family commitments on the days when the spouse is away. That makes their work–family balance an intriguing one.

On the basis of our research, we conclude that commuter families can be classified in two main types of work–family balance. The first type is the traditionalizing type and consists of a full-time working father, and a mother as homemaker who has only a limited number of paid working hours or none at all. In those traditionalizing families where both spouses are involved in paid work, the male works full time and the female part time. They resemble the dominant household arrangement in the Netherlands of 1.5 working parents. This type is traditional in its gender stereotypes: men do not share household or caring tasks and women do not bother very much about paid work. The arrangement is not traditional in the sense that the family does not passively follow the male partner in family migration whenever he makes a career move. The daily life and the social embeddedness of the family are not sacrificed for the man’s career.

The second type of work–family balance within commuter families is based on an egalitarian notion of combining work and family roles on an individual level for both parents. These commuter families are, however, primarily egalitarian in their paid-work practices. Both partners work (nearly) full time and divide the responsibility for the family income between them. One partner is locally oriented, not necessarily the mother, and the other works far beyond the local scale. The absence of the commuting parent during a substantial part of the week brings about an imbalance between the parents in their family-care roles. The home-based parent is the coordinator (and the most active in practical terms); the commuting parent engages actively in family-care tasks on the days spent in the family home, but mainly carries out well-defined straightforward household tasks. In this respect, this type deviates from the symmetric division of work and family between partners in a 4/4 workweek and equal time spent on family care. The commuter families in which both parents work full time (5/5 model), shows a work–family balance that is rare in the Netherlands: a family with dependent children in which both parents work full time.

Commuting parents in both commuter-family types take their fathering/mothering roles very seriously. They keep in contact with their children from a distance and spend quality time with them during the weekend. The parents discuss all kinds of parenting decisions by telephone or email. Home-based parents in both types are
similar in their local work orientation. They seek to reduce commuting time in order to keep a balance between work and care.

The geographical strategy of commuter families has the positive effect that for at least one partner (and sometimes both partners) the extended geographical scale of job locations can be utilized. Even though some home-based parents (both female and male) limit their work time, those involved do not consider that a great sacrifice. On the contrary, the most important experiences of sacrifice are the commuting parents’ experiences with regard to their family life, because of missing out on the daily family life for a substantial part of the time. Overall, these families feel that their exceptional household arrangement brings some work–family conflict, but also substantial enrichments in their work–family balance.

Interestingly, these families do not usually see a role for institutions outside the household, such as their employers, in supporting them to create a work–family balance. Some commuting parents have made an agreement with their employers to compress their workweek into four days, but they tend to over-compensate this ‘favor’ by working extra overtime hours on those days (which is possible because they are separated from their family on those days). Additionally, most commuter families apply a strategy that is very common in the Netherlands: at least one parent, usually the mother, works part time and on the local scale in order to balance work and family care. This finding adds to the discussion on the personalization of the politics of time in the Netherlands, as well as in other post-industrial countries. Although there is a growing societal demand for all adult members of society to be active in the labor force and to work more hours, the responsibilities of creating a work–family balance are still largely taken as an intra-household responsibility.

Note
1. We use the term ‘traditionalizing’ instead of ‘traditional’ to indicate that these families form a special category. Although these families have characteristics in which they are like traditional nuclear families, as commuter families they also have characteristics that clearly distinguish them from traditional families. Most importantly, in commuter families the husband's career does not lead to the traditional choice for family migration.

Notes on contributors
Marjolijn van der Klis is senior researcher at the Netherlands Institute for Social Research.

Lia Karsten is associate professor in Urban Geography at the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands.

References


