Geographical distances between separated parents: A longitudinal analysis
Linked lives and constrained mobility

Michael Thomas
m.j.thomas@rug.nl

https://partnerlifeproject.org/
94% of all inter-county migration events are by/for families

(U.S. Current Population Survey)

- Moves by family members
- Moves by non-family members "for family reasons"
Changing family formation & mobility

Male "breadwinner" model (1950s)

Socio-demographic changes (i.e. SDT)

Increasing complexities
Official divorce statistics

42% ... marriages end in divorce

235,000 No. people divorced in 2011

27% ... couples that were cohabiting when their child was born will have separated by the child’s 5th birthday

≈ 1/2 divorces involve children <16

* Data for England and Wales
The context

Long-term trends towards:

1. Increased separation & divorce
2. Raised profile of fathers' involvement in parenting
3. Shared parental custody
4. Extended family complexity

- Micro implications (life course dimensions)
- Macro implications (labour & housing markets)
Competing spatial opportunities & lifecourse dimensions

- The location of wider social networks
- Distance between separated parents
- Housing opportunities
- Occupational opportunities
- (Re)partnering opportunities
- The location of wider social networks
- Distance between separated parents
- Housing opportunities
- Occupational opportunities
- (Re)partnering opportunities
Competing spatial opportunities & lifecourse dimensions
Competing spatial opportunities & lifecourse dimensions

- Normative expectations of men and women - Influence how mothers and fathers differently perceive and value their various locational ties
- Primary care giver - Mothers relocation has greater repercussions for child's everyday life*

*In the UK 91% of lone-parent households are headed by women (ONS, 2015).
Data & Methods
Data

- Socio-economic & demographic micro data
- Detailed geo-codes (approximate to n'hood)
  - calc km distance
- N 402 ex-couples; n 2,477 observations

Methods

- Random effects models (within-between adjustment, Bell and Jones, 2015)

\[ y_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(x_{ij} - \bar{x}_j) + \beta_2\bar{x}_j + \beta_3x_{ij} + [u_{ij} + u_{ij}(x_{ij} - \bar{x}_j) + e_{ij}] \]

\[ \begin{bmatrix} u_{ij} \\ \epsilon_{ij} \end{bmatrix} \sim N\left(0, \begin{bmatrix} \sigma^2_{i0} & \sigma_{i1} \\ \sigma_{i1} & \sigma^2_{i1} \end{bmatrix} \right) \]

Pre-sep characteristics

(t0) → (t1) → (t2) → (t3) → (t4) → (t5) → (t6) → (t7) → (t8)
Variables

Measured before separation
- Household (im)mobility
- Marital status
- Household employment configuration
- Household education configuration
- Tenure of home
- Household income
- Father's perceived childcare involvement
- Population density

Measured after separation
- New partnership configuration
- New child(ren) configuration
- Residence of pre-separation child(ren)
- Time since separation (years)
  - Effect allowed to vary between ex-couples

Dependent variable measured after separation
- Distance separating ex-partners (log km)
Results
Existing family ties

The post-separation residence of shared (pre-separation) children

- The distance between separated parents is almost 3 times shorter when both have a child resident as compared to when only the mother has the shared child(ren)
New post-sep family ties

- Distances are greater when separated parents spend a greater proportion of the post-separation period repartnered, as opposed to single
- New children increase distance to ex-partner, but only for fathers

Personal resources

- Little evidence of any substantively important variations according to marital status, household employment status or household income
- There's a positive relationship between high human capital levels and distances between parents
Some hint that separated fathers with higher educational attainment may be more likely to move away than otherwise similar mothers.

When the father perceived that childcare was performed jointly, the distance is found to be 1.5x shorter than when the mother was the main provider of care.

The formation of new family ties (partners and children) by fathers is found to be linked to moves over longer distances away from the ex-partner than is the case for mothers.
But also ...

- The initial moves appear to strongly determine the subsequent proximity in the period following.
- Immediate circumstances under which people move around separation have strong and long-lasting impacts (types of family life, ties and contact subsequently experienced).
(Almost) All migration is family related, increasingly the post-separation family

- Increasingly recognising the role that various ties beyond the immediate household can have in forming and mediating (re)locational behaviours and outcomes
- Particular contexts in which these ties become particularly important - the post-separation family context as one such example
- For shared parenting, regular child visitation or to ensure their child’s general wellbeing, ex-partners with shared children will often feel a need to maintain close geographical proximity
Spatial constraints

- Impacts separated parents' ability to find an optimal residential location suiting other key life-course domains
  - e.g. occupational careers and repartnering

Women in the disbanded family context, appear to be disproportionately constrained (“tied”) in their relocational behaviours. Broader implications:

- Separated fathers appear more willing/able to compromise on maintained proximity to ex-partner (& child),
- Their greater relative ease of relocation could help in improving their potential for post-separation adjustment and recovery
Random effects approach

Using panel data and RE methods we see the apparent persistence of the initial distance "at" separation:

- As time passes distances increase
- BUT... most variation in the distance between ex-partners occurs within a period approximate to a year after separation
... influences on daily mobility?

- How do separated parents balance different locational commitments (work, resident children, non-resident children with ex-partner etc.)?
  - Does this affect mode choice?
- Do people compromise on proximity to work in order to maintain proximity to the family?
  - Does this increase commute times?
- Many of these questions could be explored using UKHLS, a panel of 40k HHs & 100k individuals with detailed geocodes and variables measuring:
  - travel times to non-resident parents and children
  - commuting times and
  - frequency of use of different travel modes
Thank you!

m.j.thomas@rug.nl

https://partnerlifeproject.org/