Moving to London Time:

Household co-ordination and the Infrastructure of Everyday Life

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Abstract

This paper calls for cross-disciplinary scrutiny of the costs of time-squeeze - beyond current preoccupation with time-allocation and the organisation of employment. Discussion turns to an integrated, materially embedded infrastructure of everyday life, drawing on vignettes from in-depth biographies with London working families to put the time-squeeze into material context. Reference is made to generic decision ‘dilemmas’ commonly experienced across the sample: housing affordability, childcare shortage, transport failure and school choice. These illustrate the co-constitutive nature of urban inequalities and city time. KEY WORDS: Household, co-ordination, time-squeeze, London, constraint

1. Introduction

Like city dwellers in all parts of the world promoting competitive advantage, Londoners are obsessed with time. Peter Ackroyd (2001) notes this in his Biography of London with regard to "how quickly Londoners walk" and the way commercial transactions are "conducted and monitored in the shortest possible time" (663-4). Yet, paradoxically, Londoners often spend as much time stuck in traffic or trapped in overcrowded public transport as they do striking the all important business deal. This
irony is captured in the strains of continually disrupted plans relayed by mobile phone users across the city: 'the train's running forty minutes late'; I'm walking in from Holborn because of a security alert at Chancery Lane' (Jarvis et al. 2001: 2).

While we know time to be a constant and finite resource, it is popularly identified today with 'famine', 'squeeze' and accelerated use (Hochschild 1997, Schor 1992, Robinson and Godbey 1999). This is variously explained by steadily rising working hours, increasing consumer expectation (shopping takes more time today, with more choices to make), less leisurely leisure (the trend toward bite sized exotic travel, or ‘leisure canapes’), and demand for fast, global, networked activity, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week (Southerton 2003; Future Foundation 2000). Claims that we are witnessing the speeding up of daily life resonate with the general feeling we none of us have enough time in our lives (Florida 2002: 150). But we are frequently reminded (by writers of fiction at least) that time moves differently from place to place according to the rhythms imposed by industry and inhabitants (Ackroyd 2001: 665). So it is that the harriedness associated with daily life in cities like London today is not universal but unevenly manifest. Gershuny (2000) observes, for instance, that well paid workers tend to work considerably longer hours than less well qualified workers because high status is attached to ‘being busy’ (9). Others stress that this tendency toward self exploitation, whether a product of ‘willing workers’ (Reeves 2001) or an ‘always on’ work mentality (Reich 2000), is not alone responsible for differential harriedness (Pratt 2002; Jarvis and Pratt forthcoming).

A criticism of existing theories of time squeeze is that important social and environmental inequalities tend to be overlooked. There are two reasons for this. First,
it is because of an overwhelming preoccupation with time-allocation (and associated work-life balance) as a function of the organisation of employment. Here time is typically conceived according to a featureless plane – of working hours (length of the working day) and working times (extended office hours and non-standard shift arrangements). This emphasis on time as the essential currency of production (also measured as a deficit of care for family life) (Daly 1996: 9) contributes to a growing work ‘fetishism’ in government policy. In effect it is a by-product of a ‘workification’ or work-centredness of contemporary life associated with the new economy (Hochschild 1997; English-Lueck 2002). Second, it is because emphasis on the ‘speeding up’ of daily life (particularly in relation to new information and communications technology or ICT) draws attention away from what slows many people down a lot of the time. The paradox by which people feel more harried at the same time as the city becomes increasingly paralysed by this mass of ‘busy bodies’ does not simply describe a failure in transport policy. It is a metaphor for a growing individual burden of risk and time spent searching for services once the responsibility of the state (whether by coercion or subsidy). In this respect, commentators such as Rose (1999) point to a dramatic shift from a macro, top down, law, to a micro, internal, self regulated neo-liberal governance of society. A neglected impact of this transfer of responsibility is the added burden of time (and energy consuming movement) on individuals and households as they process information and gain access to open markets for education, health, transport, family care services and the like. A mundane illustration of this inefficiency can be seen in the handling of household waste. Most local authorities hold individual households responsible for collecting items for recycling and taking them (by car) to an identified collection point (typically as part of a weekly trip to the supermarket). This means that in homes
across the country, tasks of washing, storing, sorting and transporting bottles and tins for recycling add to the burden of domestic labour to be factored into daily life. For those without access to private transport, whether for financial or ideological reasons, scope to behave environmentally is limited even if desired (see Hinchliffe 1996; Hobson 2003). A more inclusive time (and energy) efficient approach would see local authorities asserting collecting responsibility for such private practices out of public concern.

This highlights another failing in existing time-squeeze literature: the tendency to locate the problem as one lying in the realm of individuals and their capabilities. Explanations are sought from evidence of changing tastes and practices to explain why “despite it being possible for most people to have more free time and a more relaxed pace of life, they perversely opt to remain harried” (Southerton 2003: 6). This emphasis on the ‘willing worker’ and consumer treadmill effects (working more to consume more) neglects the many structural constraints on individual choice. Consequently this paper reorients discussion to account for the infrastructure of everyday life encompassing all that it takes in a practical sense for individuals and households to ‘go on’ from one day to the next. Highlighted is the way this social and material context (which may be enabling or constraining) shapes individual choice over time-use. It also shows the corollary: that the solutions people arrive at to co-ordinate activities (taking the car rather than the bus to work so as to visit a sick relative on the way home) in turn shape the social and built environment.

The paper is structured in three parts. The first part takes existing concerns with the time-squeeze and puts them into material context. A framework of theory is
developed to account for the way material, institutional and moral structures of constraint circumscribe the co-ordination of daily life. This draws on the principles of time geography and an understanding of household resource distribution. The second part animates this framework of theory by introducing short vignettes from in-depth biographies with London working families. The paper concludes by drawing implications from this one case for the wider time-squeeze debate.

2. Putting the Time Squeeze into Context

The question whether or not people are actually working more, and why they might choose (or feel compelled) to do so, is not the focus of this paper. It is sufficient to note that scholars generally agree we are witnessing the symptoms of time squeeze (acceleration in the pace of life, a rise in time-saving innovations, increasing stress, and role overload), though explanations for this vary (Schor 1992: 22). Moreover, the evidence from time-budget analysis is contradictory (Southerton 2003). For example, while Juliet Schor (1992) makes strong claims that Americans are working longer hours, a separate study, also drawing on data for the USA, suggests middle class parents are spending more time with their children than in the 1950s, 60s and 70s (Sandberg and Hofferth 2001). In part this is because labour saving devices in the home have reduced the time required for domestic chores. A shift to intensive or ‘quality’ parenting is also explained by observing that, as families purchase more services and mothers feel fulfilled by their lives outside the home, the time parents spend with their children outside work is far more child-centred than it might otherwise have been (Folbre and Nelson 2000: 128). Arguably, in some situations the time squeeze is more perceived than real. Dale Southerton (2003) makes this point by stressing that a sense of harriedness does not necessarily stem from a substantive
shortage of time (p.8). Emphasis on anxiety (rather than time shortage per se) implies that feelings of harriedness are as likely generated by what slows people down as what hurries them up. Yet existing accounts of socio-temporal organization largely deny the existence of a material world

This section identifies spheres of structural constraint making up the infrastructure of daily life (when and where the buses run, when the shops are open, how safe the streets appear, levels of congestion, parking restrictions and the like). This builds on an established body of social and feminist theory scrutinising the inner workings and lived experience of the household (Morris 1990; Himmelweit 2000). The aim is to be able to observe activities, schedules and disruptions to usual routines in their material settings as well as to acknowledge situated processes of interpretation which give meaning to these activities and settings (Smith 1987) (see for instance Boulin and Mückenberger 1999).

Three spheres of structural constraint are identified in Figure 1 below. Material context is evident in the distribution of fixed assets such as housing, schools, shops as well as street layout and ease of circulation. Institutional regimes encompass all manner of regulation from that functioning within the household to that of the state and the extent to which it regulates behaviour or subsidises private markets. Then it is with regards to a local or regional moral climate that norms of 'good parenting' and cultures of work gain popular currency (Duncan and Smith 2001; Duncan and Edwards 1999: 272). None of these spheres function in isolation, nor is there such a clear distinction, in practice, between 'agency' and 'structure' as suggested by the separate column headings. As Nancy Folbre (2001: 6) observes, "choice is a funny
thing, affected by both moral values and by social pressures. This is why too much choice - or too little social co-ordination of choice - can lead to outcomes that can be just as problematic as having no choice at all\(^2\). This statement conveys the understanding that behaviour is moderated through agent-structure interdependence and by this process liable to generate unintended or unacknowledged outcomes (Jarvis et al. 2001: 90; Giddens 1984; Gregory and Urry 1985). It is in this respect that aspects of Giddens’ structuration theory help locate sources of time-squeeze in a local urban context.

Caution is required in applying this theoretical framework in practice on two counts. First, it is important not to over determine the constraining (as opposed to enabling) role of different structures and settings. Thus a lone parent may experience limited scope to shop, travel or socialise freely without a partner to mind the children from time to time. Yet in other circumstances scope for individual choice may be increased by the absence of a partner with the capacity to veto this or impose an alternative point of view. Second, the household effectively features as a decision-making agent and as an institutional structure of constraint. This is because the household is conceived as a network or institution that mediates, or translates, social action (see for instance Pratt 1996). In short, the agency of a household can only be observed through revealed action (making what neoclassical economists view as unitary decisions) as an outcome of group compromise. To make sense of this interdependence in practice it is necessary to expand on two foundational properties of everyday co-ordination: time-space-matter and household resource distribution. Each is introduced in turn in the following section before returning to the case
illustrations from London household research (snap-shots of activity, disruption and unintended consequence) included in Figure 1 below.

**Time-space-matter**

Throughout this paper, everyday co-ordination assumes spatial as well as temporal parameters. This reflects the reality that, despite information and telecommunications ‘saturation’ (English-Lueck 2002), most of us spend much of each day orchestrating continual movement in relation to others. Whether this involves long journeys or local interaction, knowledge of where, when and how activities and relations are to be conducted is essential. In the absence of teleporting, we have to move our bodies and co-ordinate with those of others; this takes time and energy, and has to be factored in. Just because you can call the child minder and tell them that you are running late does not remove the fact that you have to get there and pick up your child somehow (see for instance Skinner 2003). Moreover, workers have to anticipate what will slow them down and thwart their efforts to juggle home and work demands. Living this close to the constant threat of crisis is very stressful. The daily routine is practiced to a fine art. Knowing local traffic conditions might mean if you get on the road at 7.25 you are at work in 20 minutes but waiting until 7.30 it takes you 40 minutes or more.

There are continual pressures to be on the move and always busy. The theoretical possibility for ICT and home-working to liberate people from the stress of dashing between fixed appointments appears to remain just that, theoretical. Of course, new technology *has* changed the way we organise our days. For a minority of autonomous workers ICT provides increased scope for working leisurely at home, making up for time spent meeting children from school by answering emails after children are asleep (Perrons 2003). At the same time there are pressures to be always ‘on call’ and a
tendency to pack more activities into each day because these can be synchronised while on the move. While ICT can be variously liberating and burdensome the point is technology has not brought about the ‘death of distance’ as once predicted (Cairncross 1997).

This is not simply to make the plea that ‘geography matters’. Indeed, as Sayer (2000: 109) points out, the concrete (material world) is always already spatial so it is not necessary to ‘add on space’. Any observations of socio-temporal organisation in urban daily life necessarily encompass spatiality, even if this is then abstracted or simply alluded to in the form of distance and travel. Nevertheless, to explain how urban inequalities and differential harriedness are co-constitutive, a framework of theory is required which makes time, space and situation specific social processes explicit. Again, Sayer (2000) warns against the erroneous use of ‘space’ and ‘time’ as contentless abstractions (separately, or together). He argues instead for a concrete, situated analysis: space-time-matter. Thus, space and time are not considered important in a general or universal sense, but rather as a specific set of contingent relations (of time, and spaced, persons) that may, or may not, enable a causal process. Of critical importance here is an understanding that people seldom have much choice about the location of their work, and where a two plus income earner household sets up home will almost certainly be sub-optimal in relation to work (Jarvis et. al. 2001). For instance a suburban residential location might reflect the choice to minimise travel times for the working mother to assist in her ‘double shift’, even if this then extends those of the working father (see for instance Brun and Fagnani 1994).
The beginning of a situated analysis is evident in pioneering time-geography research (see for instance Pred 1981; Parkes and Thrift 1980). Central to this approach, Törsten Hägerstrand (1976) identifies three constraints with respect to individual paths through time-space. The first of these, the capability constraint, concerns physical limits to movement including the inability to be in two places at once. Second, a coupling constraint describes situations which compel people to come together at certain times and locations such as for face-to-face service delivery, family celebrations, medical appointments and the like. Finally, Hägerstrand points to authority constraints associated with legal sanctions and regulations. While these 'simple but fundamental' concepts have contributed greatly to social theory (Davies 2001: 133), application to questions of work-life balance and time-squeeze has been limited in practice (the exception being a body of Scandinavian feminist research: Ellegård 1999; Vilhelmson 1999). In a rare UK example, Andy Pratt (1996) takes a ‘day in the life’ schedule of activities for a typical two-wage couple with children to illustrate the way everyday routines are essentially spaced and time-bound as well as being constantly threatened with unexpected disruption. Jarvis et al. (2001) expand upon this theme in relation to household 'strategies' to co-ordinate work, employment and daily life in the city of London. Others have sought to revive the visual qualities of Hägerstrand's (1976) time-space prism to illustrate dynamic interactions of people and place (Chatterton 1999: 125). Feminist researchers offer the best explanation why time-geography has not fulfilled its original promise. For Davies (2001), emphasis on time as a quantity based resource (equally available to all as a measure of the calendar or clock) and space as a gender-neutral, fearless dimension, obscures important social processes such as contradiction and power (see also Friberg 1993).
Household resource distribution

Problems relating to the time-squeeze are made more difficult in particular urban contexts (such as where the cost of housing is high). In this respect, individuals and household collectives gain (or lose) relative advantage in the competition for goods and services through structures of constraint (material, institutional, moral) as identified above. In turn, these are reproduced, at any one time, according to household resource distribution. Here it is constructive to rehearse the highly regarded explanation economist Amartya Sen provides for the cause of famine. Sen (1981) explains that famine is attributed less to an absolute shortage of food than failure of socially specific food entitlement (whether in relation to production, purchase or exchange). Feminist economist Nancy Folbre makes a similar point when she stresses that economic advantage is not the primary structure of constraint (Folbre 1994: 66).

From a whole economy perspective, resources include assets of income and property, state transfer payments, location specific amenities such as transport, schools and shops, inheritance or gifts and the reciprocal exchange or unpaid donation of social reproduction services made possible by proximity to close-knit social/kin networks. If, rather than think of 'time famine' as a shortage of time associated with longer working hours, attention focuses instead on resource distribution, the problem emerges as one of situation-specific prospects for time-space coordination. Once again, this suggests the growing problems of time-squeeze stem, at least in part, from individual inefficiencies attributed to a neo-liberal ‘rolling back’ of the state.

To understand the role of entitlements in resource distribution it is essential to open up the 'black-box' of the household in the manner widely adopted in feminist research. Doing so rejects the interpretation of rational choice theory that household decisions
are made on the basis of “calculative and predictive capacities” (Jordan et al. 1999). Rather than to view the household as an atomistic consensual unit, feminist theory understands that individual household members participate in group compromise through conflict and co-operation over household resources (including time) (Sen 1991). This approach acknowledges the influence of norms, convention, habit and hearsay. Thus decisions about whether to allocate time and energy to commercial or domestic activities are not determined by utility maximisation.

Arguably, explanations of everyday co-ordination need to take into account the way individuals form preferences as well as an appreciation of the way these are negotiated (and ultimately compromised) in relation to identities formed in group settings such as the household (Himmelweit 2000). Only by situating individuals in their household arrangement is it possible to account for the role gender and power play in strategies to cope with increased competition in the open market. Here it is recognised that the power of each individual to act, or to veto the action of another, is differentially constructed across time and space and, consequently, subject to ongoing negotiation between household members and between the household institution and the wider social and economic milieu. This 'duality of structure' of the household is a cornerstone of Giddens' structuration theory (Clegg 1989: 138). Included in this context is the density and intensity of social networks. This is important because many workers require “face-to-face co-location in (the right) place” to remain connected to the pulse of new ideas (Graham and Guy, 2002: 370). Similarly, in order to meet competing moral, civic and business obligations, households draw on a complex web of social relations (with the child-minder, cleaner, friends and neighbours) according to carefully orchestrated routines.
3. Tracing the infrastructure of everyday life

The way location specific attributes and amenities mutually shape and re-shape activities and social encounters can be understood in terms of the infrastructure of everyday life. In this, attention is paid to the critical role of spatial arrangement whereby the distribution and ‘spacing’ of jobs, housing and services within a particular area determine the working time arrangements and child-care options actually available to households managing two jobs or careers from a fixed residential location. Gerstel and Gross (1984) claim that theorists overlook the possibility that labour market demands may be at cross purposes for husbands and wives who are both employed. They observe this in the extreme case of commuter marriages in which dual career couples live apart at least three nights a week in separate residences (p.4) (see also Green et al. 1999, Hardill 2002). Even in more conventional domestic arrangements, it is notoriously difficult for households with two working parents to overcome the logistical as well as moral and economic obstacles to daily life. Yet the proportion of couples with children who represent ‘work-rich’ (time-stretched) dual income earners with very long working hours far exceeds that of the now outmoded ‘male breadwinner’ structure. This is explained both by a cultural change where a similar proportion of women to men are economically active (though typically employed in lower status part-time positions) and by a strong economic shift to dual income earning in couple households in order to achieve the necessary household wage. Significant in this imperative to increase household income is the rising cost
of owner occupied housing (the dominant tenure in the UK) especially for first-time buyers.

The remainder of the paper draws on household interview data from one of five metropolitan case studies conducted as part of a larger programme of UK-US comparative research. Each case study examines the way working families (employed couples with children) draw on local employment, housing, transport and child-care to co-ordinate daily life in a dynamic urban context experiencing pressures of growth and attendant congestion. In all five cities (London and Edinburgh in the UK and San Francisco, Seattle and Portland in the West Coast USA) it is widely held that families require more than one income to gain a foothold in the housing market or simply maintain current living standards. This paper limits discussion to the twenty interviews conducted with households living in central London (Hackney and Islington) and outer London (Barking). While these households share a similar composition (heterosexual couples with children) and are relatively advantaged by virtue of their employment (most having two parents in paid employment), the sample captures a range of spouse working hours, times and occupations. Biographical extracts are selected for discussion on the basis that they animate connections between particular material settings and associated socio-temporal practice. Illustrations are made with respect to generic decision ‘dilemmas’ commonly experienced across the sample: housing affordability, childcare shortage, transport failure and school choice. Of critical importance is the point that solutions to these generic problems are context dependent. People are observed to get by in profound and subtle ways.
Housing affordability

Ed and Sonia Lewis live in a social rented two-bedroom flat in the heart of fashionable Islington. Their flat is on the third floor of an attractive Edwardian terrace on a square with street parking arranged around a small communal garden. Despite living in a much sought after location their situation is far from ideal: their three children share one bedroom. This is crammed with bunk beds and a cot leaving no room for storage or space in which to play. The only realistic way they can move to a bigger property in the area is to take part in a mutual exchange, but scope to do so is limited by reduced social rented stock. When the couple first moved in, many of their neighbours were buying their homes from the council under the ‘right to buy’ provisions of the 1980 Housing Act. Since then most have sold to incoming professionals in a classic illustration of state assisted gentrification. While Ed can “earn a decent living” as a cab driver the only way they could afford to buy a home of their own would be to move to a less expensive housing market outside London. But Ed insists that the living he earns involves long hours and the knowledge he can pick up work “on his doorstep” as and when he needs. He explains:

Because I'm a cab driver I can literally get in my cab and start work straight away. I can leave here at 8, half 8 in the morning and come home at 6 at night, like in the middle of both rush hours, but most taxi drivers tend to, when they earn good money, they move out, they can’t do them hours, they have to come in at half 5 in the morning or start 2 o’clock in the afternoon, come in, like stagger it, the long shift, because they don’t want to get stuck in the traffic. I do long enough hours as it is without getting stuck an hour and half in traffic both ends of the day just so we can have more room by moving out.
Being self-employed Ed is tempted to work very long hours. He routinely works a six
day week and adds to this a Sunday shift if his takings for the week have been slow or
they face additional expenses such as a family holiday. His living is seasonal
whereby “January dies and I’ll rob Peter to pay Paul, so February I’m playing catch
up”. It is also the case that what he can earn putting in the same hours each week is
unpredictable, as he explains:

I could leave here at 8 o’clock in the morning and I might not get a job for (a
while), or I might get a stupid 2 or 3 quid job and then other days I can leave
here and there might be a couple waiting on the corner wanting to go to
Heathrow, it’s just the luck of the day.

This lack of guaranteed income drives a regime of long working hours. Ed admits he
will sometimes go out to work on a Sunday evening to “get a head start on the week”,
anticipating poor earnings, but rarely reimbursing himself this time if takings turn out
better than expected.

I can just keep working and working and I can work as long as I want. It
normally works out that I work Monday to Friday and that will cover the cab,
tax and everything and the money for family life and then Saturdays tends to
be for extras, if we’ve got stuff like we need to go shopping, clothes shopping,
I call Saturday my Barclaycard Day, because that’s what it covers! Then to
pay for holidays I’ll just try and work 3 or 4 hours every Sunday. It’s the way
I like doing it, because I’ll get the money that way, it’s the perfect job because
it’s instant overtime but it does sometimes put a strain on your family life.

Childcare shortage
Prioritising the capacity for Ed to take his cab out at any time or day of the week to boost household income restricts not only housing choice (though cost is the primary constraint), but also Sonia’s employment prospects. These material constraints are revealed in the difference between Sonia and Ed’s (stylised) time-space prisms in Figure 2. Ed’s prism is city-wide as a consequence of his auto-mobility, though his exact movements may be modified by traffic congestion. Sonia’s prism is limited in scope by the time it takes to travel places on foot or by fixed bus routes as well as by the hard-constraints of the school run and shop opening times.

Sonia has not worked for pay since her first child was born. Now, with two children in school, she is taking up a school office job. She chose this opening because it only requires her to work school hours, but childcare remains an issue for the youngest child (who has just turned one). Neither set of grandparent lives sufficiently close to babysit and she could not afford the cost of a private nursery or childminder on her low wage. A subsidised place in a state nursery will only be made available when their son turns three. This means that in the intervening period Ed will have to change his working hours to provide child-care during term-time when Sonia is at work. He can do this because he is self-employed but Sonia explains that this will reduce Ed’s earning so that having both of them at work will not make them any better off.

we won’t necessarily be any better off but what we said was if I could get this job that’s going at the school, if I’m there now, if we can manage for a year and a half, once the baby’s in at nursery then Ed could go back to work normal, you know, we wouldn’t necessarily benefit from it (now) but I’d get my foot in the door to get the job because them jobs are hard to come by.
The problem of access to affordable child-care is well known and by no means unique to London. The problem is most severe for low wage households but shortages are also apparent for others able to afford private for-profit nurseries. This is reflected in the way mothers queue up for a nursery place long before they give birth and once this is secured they show great reluctance to switch facilities to suit a change in personal circumstance. The problem illustrates clearly the co-constitution of material and temporal constraint (housing and employment). Access to affordable childcare is not only limited by inadequate state provision: shortages occur in private-for-profit markets because wages paid to care-givers (the majority of them women) do not compete with other commercial activities. In high cost cities in particular, lack of affordable housing for 'key workers' means that minimum wages are not living wages. David Blau (2001: 8) looks in detail at the shortfall in childcare services in high cost cities in the US context. He finds that pressure to keep costs down to what working parents can bear in the private-for-profit sector degrades the pay, status and skill of childcare workers. This is reflected in evidence that the UK currently has the least qualified childcare workforce in the EU, high staff turnover and a low average age of nursery workers of 24 (Land, 2002). Consequently, the availability of very low wage workers, many of whom are themselves mothers, typically rests with the supply of unpaid childcare by grandmothers, friends and relatives. Complicating the notion of a care-deficit and estimates of its likely scale is evidence that child-care is not limited geographically to the state-market-family mix of any one nation or region. In their book 'global woman: nannies, maids and sex workers', Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild generate the image of a 'global care chain'. They see the growing care deficit as the female underside to globalisation, whereby:
in the absence of help from male partners, many first world women have succeeded in tough 'male world' careers only by turning over the care of their children, elderly parents and homes to women from the Third World (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003: 2).

Transport failure

Other households higher up this chain of provision are not without experiencing constraint in the way they co-ordinate daily life. Take for example the case of Mr and Mrs Loxton, both full time lawyers living in central London. They can afford to pay a day nanny to look after their two children (aged 6 and 8) after school as well as employ a cleaner once a week. Living where they do in Islington, in walking distance of a North London Line station (east-west fixed rail), they hoped to run only one car and otherwise take advantage of London’s high density bus and train networks. It was Mr Loxton’s intention to take the children to school by train each day on his way to work in the city. This arrangement fell apart because severe overcrowding made it impossible to predict journey times:

We tried to use the train but it was absolutely hopeless. You couldn't get on the train it was so full when it arrived. Then of course you are really in trouble, because you are stuck at a station, they are only every 15 minutes, you can't get on the train, what you end up doing, you come back here, get the car and drive, you know.

Now the Loxton’s run two cars so Mr Loxton can drive one to his central London office each day and the nanny they employ can use the other for the school-run. Mrs Loxton alone uses public transit, travelling to work each day by bus. The fact that this family can afford to run two cars and employ a nanny and enjoy a home in an
accessible central location is indicative of the way high earners have more options in resolving their work-life arrangements: but this is not the only point of note. Coordinating daily life in this fragmented way is labour (time) intensive and energy inefficient. This case shows how private solutions to overcome infrastructure failure impose heavy social costs (more private cars on the roads contributing pollution, congestion and hazards to pedestrians and cyclists).

While this is a generic problem it reflects a particular local context. Jerram and Wells (1996) observe of the 'much derided' North London Line that:

the timetable provides for a train every fifteen minutes between Richmond and North Woolwich, and every half-hour between Gospel Oak and Barking. But, notoriously, these trains do not run on time. They may not run at all, especially at weekends, because of engineering works. During the morning and evening rush-hours, the two or three-carriage trains only approach capacity over some sections of the line, with commuting schoolchildren, workers and students. At other times, especially on the Barking branch, there is a mere scattering of the typically low-income clientele who are dependent on public transport, as also to be found on any London bus: women with small children, older people, and members of ethnic minorities, making short journeys (256).

**School choice**

In the case of the Locke family, both parents drive in separate cars to work in the same street because they each drop off children attending different schools. This narrative begins with the conscious decision this couple made, both working full time
as partners in the same entrepreneurial business, to live and work in central London so as to create a time-efficient, distinctly urban, non-commuting lifestyle. Mr Locke explains:

What we've created is a business close to our home, which is a 10 minute drive away, where our business revolves around Hackney, Clerkenwell and Islington. So we're neither of us commuters. We've created that lifestyle for ourselves.

Then Mrs Locke goes on to explain how, searching for schools they felt were suitable for each of their four children, they abandoned this local way of living.

Now our commuting is all family related, not work related. It's all about the kids, the school run and all that. Because our two youngest children go to school in Knightsbridge and you can't get much further than that.

With two children attending school in Knightsbridge, a third near Regents Park and a fourth in the City of London itself, each parent drives for over an hour before finally reaching their place of work located just three miles from the family home. Moreover, as their business has prospered and the effort of living at the heart of a congested city has increased, they have invested in a holiday home 'in the middle of the (county) countryside' where they 'have a separate lifestyle' 'when (they) need to escape’. Thus, what started out as a justification of city living on the basis of time efficiency soon became a narrative of time-squeeze. Harriedness is here not adequately explained in relation either to rising work effort or consumer treadmill (working more to consume more). Why these 'urban villagers' make recourse to time and energy consuming long distance daily movement is better explained in terms of competing identities (as gentrifiers and ‘good parents’). In a state of neoliberal governance, parents are held individually responsible for ensuring their child has the
best education (and associated cultural capital advantage) drawing on cultural capital to interpret imperfect information on school standards, paying for better performing schools and travelling further afield.

**Time-efficiency**

Just as Ed Lewis (the cab driver) defends living in central London in overcrowded accommodation in terms of the way it brings work to his door, so Harry Law, a successful investment banker, justifies his mode of transport by claiming it is more time efficient. Harry explains why he chooses to travel 20 minutes to Canary Wharf by cab each day:

> I start work as soon as I step out the door. I'll have 15 voice mail messages and I deal with them on the way in. I work while I'm in the cab whereas if I take a bus or the underground I lose up to 45 minutes

But Harry and his wife Kate, a lawyer (currently on maternity leave), demonstrate their strong attachment to a home in central London on the basis of quite different material circumstance to Ed. They recently bought a run-down terrace house in the London Fields area, which they identified as “one of the last affordable bits of N1” because it met their taste in urban vitality. While they enjoy proximity to shops and restaurants they do not plan to send their son to the neighbourhood school. By rejecting public transit in favour of a more private means of conveyance, Harry Law not only ‘saves time’ by speeding up the journey but also improves his capacity to conduct work on the move (buses are noisy and mobile phones do not work underground) (Jarvis et al. 2001: 2). By underwriting this perk, Harry’s employer effectively entitles him to ‘jump the queue’ in the competition for space on the roads (taxis use priority lanes and are exempt from inner London congestion charges). In
effect the cab is a mobile work-place for both the cab-driver and his fare, but in viewing this observation in terms of unequal resource distribution it is clear they each experience time quite differently.

4. Discussion

The impact uneven resource distribution has on individual and household time squeeze is most easily identified in relation to discrete dilemmas. This was first illustrated in relation to a lack of affordable owner occupied housing and reduced mobility in the social rented sector where the sale of former council homes has reduced the overall supply. To raise the deposit for a home in a high cost city such as London, buyers increasingly rely on inheritance, financial gifts from extended family, bonuses or equity from earlier property transactions (Jarvis 2003; see also Hamnett 1999). This puts those without these particular resources at a huge disadvantage. In turn, those pushed out of accessible central locations can experience fresh constraints with respect to long distance commuting and disruption to social and kin networks which typically provide vital support with routine or emergency childcare.

The Lewis family vignette introduced above clearly illustrates how socio-temporal practices and material context (in this case residential location) are co-constitutive. To view Ed's long working hours or Sonia's decision to limit her search for employment to low wage ‘mothers hours’ as questions of temporal constraint alone is to miss the point. Structures of housing (and childcare and social networks) effectively circumscribe household employment (and income prospects). In turn, of course, resource distribution associated with Ed’s occupation and the normalisation of him as
the primary breadwinner limits this household’s ability to compete in the private market economy.

Traditionally, families have constructed clear temporal boundaries around 'work-work' and 'home-work' through the differential meaning attached to the work week and weekends, family time and vacations - but these are breaking down (Zuzunek and Smale 1992; Silverstone 1993). We see this in the Lynsted family case included by way of illustration of group compromise in Figure 1. On the one hand, the colour coded family calendar identifies 'who's taking who and who's doing what' in terms of business and after-school activities. On the other hand, these activities (and communications regarding their co-ordination) transcend clear spatial and temporal demarcation. Moreover, Ed is not ‘always on’ in the fugue-like sense of an ideas-generating professional, but he does live with the continual possibility of ‘going to work’. With his cab parked out front (the benefits of a resident parking permit) and the city on his doorstep, like an alchemist, he knows he can always turn time to financial advantage.

It has long been recognised that family households are 'greedy institutions' in which women, despite changes in their participation in the paid labour force, are still expected to devote much of their time and energy to unpaid domestic work (Coser, 1974). We see this in the case of Mr and Mrs Little in Figure 1. One way that families can control, shift or ultimately 'save' their time is to purchase substitutes for aspects of household social reproduction work from private markets. It is usual to conceptualise the potential to ‘buy time’ by substituting purchased services in terms of family resource management. Mr and Mrs Loxton have adopted this strategy.
What we also see with insight from the framework developed here is the differential role of moral cultures in this regard. A number of the London households defused conflict over wives' unfair 'second shift' by delegating unpopular cleaning tasks to paid helpers. Others who could technically afford the services of a cleaner resisted the idea because of competing values concerning self-sufficiency, unique standards of domestic labour and privacy (see also Daly 1996: 111).

**Concluding remarks**

This paper seeks to lift concern with symptoms of time-squeeze out of the current preoccupation with work (particularly paid employment) and time-use. Attention is drawn instead to the paradox that as people are feeling more rushed and short of time they are also routinely held up by obstacles to access, movement, reliability, comfort and safety. Arguably, in order to understand uneven development and differential harriedness research is needed which identifies what restricts activity and interaction as much as what drives general ‘busyness’. While existing explanations of time-squeeze locate the problem in the realm of individual choice, the evidence presented here suggests that choice is contingent upon material context, institutional regime and moral climate. None of these spheres function is isolation. Rather, the impact of these combined structures cut across all dimensions of time-space co-ordination. Moreover, they may at any one time be enabling or constraining where coordination necessarily implies both spacing and timing (as a function of time-space-matter) and differential resource entitlement determines the everyday infrastructure *actually available*. What this demonstrates is the closely bound nature of spatial arrangement and temporal ordering (of ‘work’ and ‘life’).
For the sake of clarity, discussion focuses on discrete ‘dilemmas’ which highlight connections between concrete relations and social processes (such as between housing distribution and working hours; household structure and childcare availability; residential location, school choice and long distance movement). The critical point to note is that effort to reconcile competing demands of employment and domestic work (as well as moral responsibilities toward spouse, children, friendships and kin) are profoundly shaped by local urban context. Thus a central purpose of this paper is to urge urban planners, educationists and civic leaders to engage in a shared debate concerning the private and social costs of time-squeeze alongside policy makers and trade unionists focusing on work and employment issues. For this debate to have meaning a more integrated, materially embedded theory of everyday co-ordination is required. A related point to make is that, regardless whether people are working more, the time-squeeze debate essentially focuses attention on social values. The question is raised, for instance, whether we care sufficiently about the consequence of escalating inequality, congestion, pollution and uneven development, to invest in public solutions to private co-ordination problems, in situations where these threaten social cohesion and environmental sustainability. Here this question is highlighted in relation to a fundamental shift toward a neoliberal mode of governance (in Britain but also in other advanced economies) and with this increased individual risk and time spent identifying services once the responsibility of the state.

The household data and scenarios introduced by way of illustration in this paper relate to a relatively advantaged population of working families. Despite the Lewis family experiencing quite severe overcrowding and few options to improve their housing situation, they can afford overseas holidays and up to date domestic technology. It is
unsurprising that Ed Lewis works a six to seven day week to earn money for “the extras” when he sees his new neighbours enjoying the fruits of their better rewarded labour. By scrutinising relative within-class differences it is possible to make two final observations. First, ostensibly similar working families have to adapt in a wide variety of ways, on a practical level, to piece together elements of housing, employment and family. Second, regardless how uneven the distribution of resources (such as income, assets and location) between households, there are no simple winners.

Figure 1: Tracing structure-agent interdependence in everyday co-ordination: decisions, networks, action and unintended consequence (illustrated with extracts from the London household research) - structures can be enabling and/or constraining.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decisions/Action</th>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Structures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual Preference</td>
<td>Group Compromise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscious/Planned</td>
<td>e.g. Career building and family formation: &quot;I wasn't going to start a family until I'd finished my training which (in medicine) involves long hours and a lot of moving about&quot; Mrs Lamb</td>
<td>e.g. The 'colour co-ordinated' family calendar: &quot;we plan the calendar, often by the week, by the months, that's knowing who's taking who and who's doing what&quot; Mrs Lynsted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taken-for-granted norms/Unintended consequences</td>
<td>Occupational sex segregation and dominant cultures of work: “I left (the Law) because they consider a woman with a baby to be a liability, who won’t be committed to work daft city hours”</td>
<td>Blurring of work-work and home-work: &quot;our (lives are completely mixed up, we are always working on the computer (at home) doing bits of (work) and the kids call me at work&quot; Mrs Lynsted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mrs Lonmore</td>
<td>2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Lamb (Barking)</td>
<td>full time GP, spouse full time hospital consultant, 2 children (3, 6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Lynsted (Hackney)</td>
<td>full time nursing adviser, spouse full time artist/lecturer, 2 children (10, 14)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Loxton (Islington)</td>
<td>full time lawyer, spouse full time lawyer, 2 children (5, 7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Little (Barking)</td>
<td>full time electrical engineer, spouse full time care assistant (eves/w'ds), 2 children (4, 7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Lonmore (Islington)</td>
<td>part time civil servant, spouse full time solicitor, 1 child (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2:**
Stylised time-space prism for the Lewis family – showing gender difference associated with hard & soft constraints.

Source: Authors diagram adapted from Pacione (2001: 339), based on ideas developed by Hägestrand (1982).
References


Families and Work Institute (2003) Sparking Connections: Community Based Strategies for Helping Family, Friend and Neighbor Caregivers Meet the Needs of Employees, their Children and Employers, on-line access 24.03.03

http://www.familiesandwork.org/publications/sparking.htm


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1. It is important to note that this partial view is not restricted to the sociological literature. The urban studies and geography literature can be accused of preoccupation with spatial relations (proximity of jobs to homes) to the neglect of time.

2. The clearest examples of this pertain to the environment such as the free-rider effect or the 'tragedy of the commons' associated with unrestricted opportunity to pollute a public good such as the atmospheric (see for instance the classic argument by Hardin 1968).

3. Recognising this coupling constraint, demand for ‘concierge services’ is booming, set up to meet the needs of highly paid workers too busy to wait at home for deliveries or supervise house-cleaning. Access to such liberating personal attention comes as a perk with employment at some of the top City firms.

4. Both parents work for pay in 65 per cent of ‘nuclear’ families (couples with dependent children) in Britain. Of this two-income population, more than half represent one-and-a-half earners with only one in six comprising two parents working full time in professional/managerial ‘careers’ (source: data derived from the 1991 SARs from MIDAS, updated in relation to 2001 early release Census of Population data; Jarvis 1997: 527).

5. It is important to note that a ‘necessary household wage’ is contingent on many factors. Necessity relates to that which households aspire to, as well as what is essential to facilitate their ‘getting by’. Of course, this is totally subjective: but that's the point. People choose to compromise on some issues to achieve other ends.
In five of the dual earning couples with children, both parents are employed in hourly paid 'jobs'; in twelve they are both employed in salaried 'careers'. Three of the families represent (temporary) 'male breadwinner' structures (two hourly paid, one professional). In eight of the dual earning couples, the female spouse works reduced hours. Pseudonyms have been given to all interviewees (all surnames beginning 'L' to denote London source of this case study) and all identifying features removed to preserve anonymity. Interviews were conducted with partners together so as to engage directly with issues of spouse negotiation in the joint telling of both everyday routines and life-histories.