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# Moving to London Time

## Household co-ordination and the infrastructure of everyday life

Helen Jarvis

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**ABSTRACT.** This article calls for cross-disciplinary scrutiny of the costs of time squeeze – beyond current preoccupation with time allocation and the organization 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** • constraint • co-ordination • household • London • time squeeze

### 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’ (pp. 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 40 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 (Schor, 1992;

Hochschild, 1997; Robinson and Godbey, 1999; Ciulla, 2000). 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 towards bite-sized exotic travel, or 'leisure canapés'), and demand for fast, global, networked activity, 24 hours a day, seven days a week (Future Foundation, 2000; Southerton, 2003). Claims that we are witnessing the speeding up of daily life resonate with the general feeling that none of us has 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' (p. 9). Others stress that this tendency towards 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 organization 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 paralyzed 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

so on. 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 article 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 article 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 article concludes by drawing implications from this one case for the wider time-squeeze debate.

### **Putting the Time Squeeze into Context**

The question as to 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 article. It is sufficient to note that scholars generally agree that 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 that middle class parents are spending more time with their children than in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s (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 that 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 so on). This builds on an established body of social and feminist theory scrutinizing 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; Boulin and Mückenberger, 1999).

Three spheres of structural constraint are identified in Table 1. 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 subsidizes 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 Edwards, 1999: 272; Duncan and Smith, 2001). 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) 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' (p. 6).<sup>2</sup> This statement conveys the understanding that behaviour is

moderated through agent–structure interdependence and by this process liable to generate unintended or unacknowledged outcomes (Giddens, 1984; Gregory and Urry, 1985; Jarvis et al., 2001: 90). It is in this respect that aspects of Giddens’s structuration theory help to locate sources of time-squeeze in a local urban context.

Caution is required when applying this theoretical framework in practice on two counts. First, it is important not to overdetermine the constraining (as opposed to enabling) role of different structures and settings. Thus a lone parent may experience limited scope to shop, travel or socialize 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 neo-classical 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 (snapshots of activity, disruption and unintended consequence) included in Table 1.

### **Time–space–matter**

Throughout this article, 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 practised 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 organize 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 synchronized 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 organization 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 hurriedness 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 minimize 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 Parkes and Thrift, 1980; Pred, 1981). 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 coordinate 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 of 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 that 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 (1994: 66) makes a similar point when she stresses that economic advantage is not the primary structure of constraint. 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



**TABLE 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**

Decisions/ Action	Agency		Structures		
	Individual Preference	Group Compromise	Material Context	Institutional Regime	Moral Climate
Conscious/ Planned	e.g. Career building and family formation: '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' (Mrs Lamb).	e.g. The 'colour-co-ordinated' family calendar: 'We plan the calendar, often by the week, by the months, that's knowing who's taking who and who's doing what' (Mrs Lynsted).	e.g. Transport infrastructure, cost, reliability and safety: 'You couldn't get on the train it was so full when it arrived' (Mr Loxton).	e.g. Childcare: Britain promotes 'maximum private responsibility mode' daycare in a climate in which private-for-profit nurseries remain in short supply (O'Connor et al. 1999: 15).	e.g. Non-waged work discounted as a 'moral responsibility' which is binding in intimate relations (as parent or spouse) (Folbre, 2001: 66).
Taken-for-granted Norms/ Unintended Consequences	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' (Mrs Lonmore).	Blurring of work-work and home-work: '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' (Mrs Lynsted).	Purchase of second car/contribution to traffic congestion: 'You can't get on the train (so) you come back here, get the car and drive' (Mr Loxton).	In the British context 'private' means informal. Working round childcare restricts women's hours and pay and exploits a 'care chain' of potentially global extent. (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003).	The second shift: 'It's just happened that way, I'm not the type of person that says a woman's place is in the kitchen (but) that's the way it goes' (Mr Little).

Mrs Lamb (Barking): full-time GP, spouse full-time hospital consultant, two children (3, 6).

Mrs Lynsted (Hackney): full-time nursing adviser, spouse full-time artist/lecturer, two children (10, 14).

Mr Loxton (Islington): full-time lawyer, spouse full-time lawyer, two children (5, 7).

Mr Little (Barking): full-time electrical engineer, spouse full-time care assistant (eves/w'ds), two children (4, 7).

Mrs Lonmore (Islington): part-time civil servant, spouse full-time solicitor, one child (3).

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., 1994). 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 maximization.

Arguably, explanations of everyday co-ordination need to take into account the way that 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 that gender and power play in strategies to cope with increased competition in the open market. Here it is recognized 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's 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.

### **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 childcare 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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 article 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 childcare 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 article limits discussion to the 20 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 eight, half eight in the morning and come home at six 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 five in the morning or start two 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 eight o'clock in the morning and I might not get a job for (a while), or I might get a stupid two or three 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 three or four 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

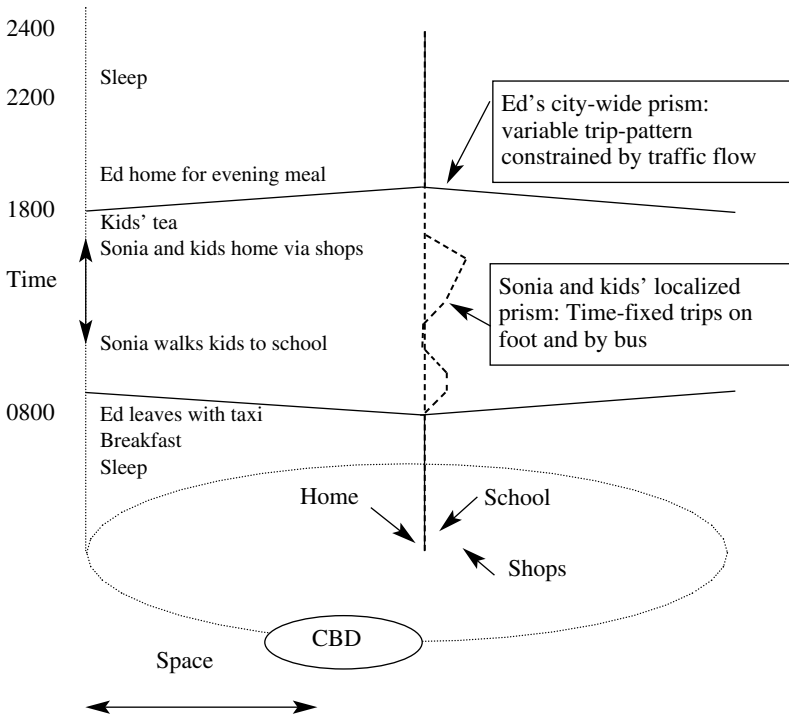
Prioritizing the capacity for Ed to take his cab out at any time or day of the week to boost household income restricts not only housing choice (though cost is the primary constraint), but also Sonia's employment prospects. These material constraints are revealed in the difference between Sonia and Ed's (stylized) time-space prisms in Figure 1. 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 child minder on her low wage. A subsidized 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 childcare 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.



Source: Author's diagram adapted from Pacione (2001: 339), based on ideas developed by Hägestrand (1982).

**FIGURE 1**  
**Stylized time-space prism for the Lewis family – showing gender difference associated with hard and soft constraints**

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 (2003) generate the image of a 'global care chain'. They see the growing care deficit as the female underside to globalization, 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. (p. 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 5 and 7) after school as well as employ a cleaner once a week. Living where they do in Islington, within walking distance of a North London Line station, 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 Loxtons 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. Co-ordinating 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 to 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 15 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. (p. 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 ten-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 a 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 neo-liberal 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 entitlement 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 he 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.

### 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 (Hamnett, 1999; Jarvis, 2003). 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 earlier 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 occupa-

tion and the normalization 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 (Zuzanek and Smale, 1992; Silverstone, 1993). We see this in the Lynsted family case included by way of illustration of group compromise in Table 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 recognized 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 Table 1. One way that families can control, shift or ultimately 'save' their time is to purchase substitutes for aspects of household social reproduction work. It is usual to conceptualize 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).

## **Conclusion**

This article 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 hurriedness 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 co-ordination 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 child-care 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 article 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 of 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 neo-liberal 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 article 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 scrutinizing 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.

## Notes

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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. Recognizing 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 percent 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' (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.
6. In five of the dual earning couples with children, both parents are employed in hourly paid 'jobs'; in 12 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.

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