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# **Rethinking ‘mobile work’: boundaries of time, space and social relation in the working lives of mobile hairstylists**

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**Abstract** This article proposes that ‘mobile work’ be analysed on the basis of differences in the relationship of mobility to labour process tasks: *mobility as work*, *mobility for work*, and *working while mobile*. While *working while mobile* is a largely white-collar (and well researched) phenomena, *mobility as work* and *mobility for work*, involve a more diverse range of work, and are often omitted from sociological analysis of mobile work. The diversity work involving mobility is explored and is followed by an empirical investigation of mobile hairstyling, a form of *mobility for work* that has increased over the last quarter century. Data is drawn from the Labour Force Survey and interviews with mobile stylists. The relationship between mobility and the construction of spatial, social and temporal work-life boundaries is excavated and it is contended that, in light of the full range of mobile work, it is difficult to argue that ‘place’ is of diminishing importance.

**Keywords:** hairstyling, labour process, mobile work, temporality, work-life boundaries, workspaces

**Citation:** Cohen, R.L. (2010) ‘Rethinking ‘mobile work’: boundaries of time, space and social relation in the working lives of mobile hairstylists’ *Work, Employment and Society*, 24(1): 65-84.

## **Rethinking ‘mobile work’: boundaries of time, space and social relation in the working lives of mobile hairstylists**

There has been a recent explosion in academic analyses of ‘mobile work’ (for instance: Lilischikis, 2003; Vartiainen, 2006; Sherry and Salvador, 2001; Brodt and Verburg, 2007; Laurier, 2001; Felstead et al., 2005a; Felstead et al., 2005b; Perry et al., 2001). This is partly due to new evidence that workers are working in multiple workplaces (Felstead et al., 2005b; Hislop and Axtell, 2007), but interest in mobile work predates is at times only perfunctorily linked to evidence of its prevalence. Instead mobile work is presented as a manifestation of broader dynamics: the transformative (and liberating, or alternately disciplinary) potential of technology (Sherry and Salvador, 2001; Toffler, 1980); the diminishing importance of place (and ‘decorporealisation’) in a world of globalizing flows (Castells, 1996; Urry, 2000); the commodification of space (Lefebvre, 1991; Brown and O’Hara, 2003); and the ‘greediness’ (or unboundedness) of work (Baines and Gelder, 2003; Felstead et al., 2005a). These theoretical foci have provided fruitful lenses through which to examine mobility – for example nicely highlighting the requirement on mobile workers to ‘assemble’ and ‘reassemble’ their workspaces (Felstead et al., 2005a; Laurier, 2001) – but they have also exacerbated the tendency to focus on work mobility driven by information and communications technology (ICT) at the expense of other forms,<sup>1</sup> obscuring the material reality of most spatial mobility for work.

Since the spatial mobility of work pre-dates recent technological innovations (Brodt and Verburg, 2007: 62) and encompasses diverse occupations (discussed in more detail below), empirical and theoretical analyses that concentrate on ICT-dependent mobile workers are partial. They are also class and gender biased – spotlighting relatively privileged white-collar ‘professional and managerial’ work whilst, as Brown and O’Hara footnote (2003: 1565), ‘neglecting’ blue-collar and, I would add, traditionally female, or ‘pink collar’ work.<sup>2</sup> This article introduces a conceptualisation of mobile work that allows occupational and class diversity to be captured, and highlights issues of temporal and spatial freedom and control.

By discriminating between various drivers of spatial mobility, three types of mobile work are identified: *mobility as work*, *mobility for work*, and *working while mobile*. I suggest that previous studies, of white-collar mobile workers, have examined a single type of mobile work: *working while*

*mobile*. Conversely most spatially mobile ‘working class’ jobs involve *mobility for work* or *mobility as work*. By extending conceptual and empirical discussions to include these types of mobile work a more complete understanding of spatial mobility, its causes and consequences, is achieved.

Later sections of this article examine rates of mobile work by occupational group, highlighting the diversity of mobile work, before focusing in more detail on an empirical example of *mobility for work*, mobile hairstyling. This example is employed to underscore some of the characteristics of *mobility for work*: the ongoing importance of place and corporeality; and the minimal extension of what Lefebvre (1991) terms ‘abstract space’. Notably, while the ‘workscape’ (Felstead et al., 2005a: 16-19) inhabited by mobile hairstylists extend across the city their workplaces are neither corporate nor uniform. Rather, the majority of their work gets done at designated times in a series of otherwise ‘private’ sites. In these circumstances, the extent to which temporal, spatial and social work-life boundaries are preserved or undermined is a product of workers’ negotiated relations with clients, and by the employment relations which frame these.

## **Conceptualising Mobile Work**

Initially mobile work (alternately termed ‘telework’) aroused interest from academics whose primary concern was large-scale social, temporal and spatial transformations rather than the labour process *per se*. Toffler (1980) set a trend, in linking mobility to technology. He saw ICT-enabled mobility as emancipatory, imagining a future when workers’ home and work spaces were reintegrated, and alienation vanquished. As Pyöriä notes, these ‘unrealistic and populist claims still doggedly raise their heads when discussing the possibilities of telework’ (2003: 168). So even as more critical academic studies are appearing (see Felstead et al., 2005a; Perry et al., 2001; Sherry and Salvador, 2001) the connection between mobility and ICT is reproduced with assertions such as Vartiainen’s that, ‘[m]obility’ [has] a strong link to wireless technologies’ (2006: 14) common. Moreover an idealised version of mobile work persists in the popular media, for instance a story in CNNMoney.com on ‘extreme teleworking’ is subtitled, ‘want to see the world and collect a healthy paycheck? Just grab your laptop and go’ (Morrison, 2007). Thus increasingly the archetypal mobile worker, independent, decorporealised, achieving ‘anywhere, anytime’ connectivity, has become a potent symbol of the new. He (it usually is a ‘he’) has come to embody macro-social potentialities be they Harvey’s ‘time-space compression’ (instantaneous communication undermining the importance of geographic distance, or

location), Castell's 'network society'. Even when arguments are made for the ongoing importance of co-presence (Felstead et al., 2005a; Urry, 2002), these discussions assume white-collar workers, so co-presence is seen primarily as a means of achieving 'informal conversation' (Urry, 2002: 260) or the 'face work' necessary for smoothing collegial relations (Felstead et al., 2005a: 164), rather than primary labour process objectives.

In this conceptualisation mobile work is both product and cause of the declining importance of place. As fewer and fewer sites are outside of mobile phone, and therefore email, range, work can be done anywhere, and as more places become workplaces the values and rationality of the workplace are generalised. Space becomes commodified, generating universal and virtually identical worksites (Brown and O'Hara, 2003; Lefebvre, 1991). This should mean that workers can enter a new potential worksite (for example a motorway service station 'Business Centre') and immediately feel at home (or 'at work'). However, looking at mobile white-collar workers, Felstead et al. find that 'the same sites are visited time and again' (2005a: 149). These workers are aware that not all workplaces are equal and resort to the familiar. When mobile work involves physical manipulations of inert or situated materials unfamiliar places may pose greater problems, and as we will see, the decreasing importance of place be yet more difficult to accept.

Where mobile work transforms previously non-work spaces into work-spaces it has the potential to dissolve spatial, and often also temporal, boundaries as 'aspects of working on the move may lead to an overlap or merging of the times and spaces of work and non-work' (Felstead et al., 2005a: 34; See also: Lilischikis, 2003; Sherry and Salvador, 2001). However whether this is a function of mobility *per se* is problematised by Hislop and Axtell's (2007) comparative study of mobile domestic appliance service engineers and HR consultants, which highlights the importance of employment relations: whilst the self-employed consultants work evenings and weekends, 'a positive flipside of the engineers' employment relationship [rigidly monitored employees, with 38 hour weeks and paid overtime] was that it established a clear boundary between work and home and contributed to them not experiencing a problem in managing their work-life balance' (2007: 48). Hislop and Axtell go on to suggest that variation in worker-client relationships affects workers' capacity to maintain boundaries between home and work. In their study 'relationships with clients' is largely measured by duration – they contrast the engineers' relatively short distances from and short interactions with a series of clients with the consultants' longer distances from, and project-long interactions with, particular clients. (Hislop and

Axtell, 2007: 48-48). However it is possible to extrapolate a more general argument: mobile workers' socio-economic relations, with clients/customers or employers, influences their capacity (and desire) to maintain spatial and temporal boundaries. This is an argument that will be picked up later in this article, with reference to mobile hairstylists. Before that a new conceptualisation of mobile work is developed, starting with an exploration of variation in the space and time flexibility (and therefore 'moveability') of different jobs. As this discussion leads towards the development of a typology a central issue is control over work movement: is mobility made possible or required?

## **Reconceptualising mobile work 1: time, space and mobility**

Work can be differentiated on the basis of the relationships of the labour process to place and time. This is nicely highlighted by Wiberg's (2005) two-by-two matrix (adapted in Figure 1, below), which categorizes work according to its time and space (in)dependence. This makes evident that few tasks are truly 'anytime, anywhere' (cell 1). In large part only those requiring little or no direct communication and few lightweight materials. In practice, additional constraints – technological (faulty equipment), practical (logistical problems with carrying sufficient equipment) and cultural (norms governing suitable and unsuitable behaviour in different environments) – mean that even fewer tasks can be accomplished 'anywhere, anytime' (Felstead et al., 2005a; Laurier, 2001; Perry et al., 2001). Other tasks are time-sensitive but can (formally) be done anywhere (cell 3). Many of these involve direct communication (and associated interpersonal schedule-harmonization), but not face-to-face contact. Notwithstanding corporate hyperbole about 'anytime, anywhere access,' ICT advances have probably been particularly effective in facilitating 'anywhere, particular time' work. It is where white-collar work is time-dependent that pressures are highest to work outside of formal workspaces, for instance on vacations (Fraser, 2001).

Figure 1 here

Some place dependent work ('anytime, particular place', cell 2, or 'particular time, particular place', cell 4) involves multiple locations and thus movement (for example, firefighting), but some does not (assembly line work) and some may or may not (actors in a touring company perform at various venues but actors in a local company perform and rehearse in a single workplace). Therefore, whereas place independent work (cells 1 or 3) *may* involve mobility, place dependent work (cells 2 or 4) will only

involve mobility where multiple workplaces exist. However, given multiple workplaces workers' mobility is *required*, not optional. When work is 'particular time, particular place' (cell 4) external temporal cues determine the temporality of workers' movement.

## **Reconceptualising mobile work 2: a typology**

In an effort to differentiate among mobile workers Lilischkis (2003) focuses on their 'level of detachedness' from the workplace: 'on-site movers' work in different places on a given site; 'yo-yos' have a fixed base but occasionally work away; 'pendulums' alternate between two locations (for instance home and work); 'nomads' work at changing fixed locations; and 'carriers' work whilst moving. Whilst this identifies spatio-temporal patterns of movement the relationship between work (or the labour process) and mobility is not specified: workers whose work requires movement are undifferentiated from workers who are able to *choose* to work in multiple places (a distinction between choice and constraint nicely highlighted in Felstead et al.'s (2002) homeworking study). To resolve this ambiguity the following typology focuses on the relationship of mobility to the accomplishment of work-tasks, differentiating between workers whose object is the achievement of motion, those whose work is not movement itself but necessitates movement, and those whose work may be accomplished while moving or in multiple locations (but could equally be accomplished in a single location).

- **Mobility as work:** *cycle couriers; truck drivers; pilots.* The end is movement of people, goods or vehicles between places. Where human beings are transported *mobility as work* encompasses more than physical transportation; jobs such as flight assistant are peripheral to transportation aims but essential to successful management of customer transit and therefore included in *mobility as work*. Some of these workers control their routes (taxi drivers), or the temporal ordering of work (cycle couriers (Stewart, 2004)); whereas other workers have little (bus driver) or no (flight assistant) control over route or temporality. *Mobility as work* is place and time dependent, but involves spatial maps or 'worksapes' peculiar to the work-task (thus flight paths, cycle routes and bus routes across a city all vary).
- **Mobility for work:** *district managers; migrant farm labourers; plumbers; construction workers; direct-sellers.* Work is spatially dispersed, requiring mobility to accomplish. Visits to each workplace may be brief or extended. This work cannot be accomplished in a single

workplace but may involve more or less frequent movement. Therefore workers' experience of mobility may be more or less central to their jobs. Whether intra-workplace mobility (Lilischkis's 'on-site movers') should be categorized as *mobility for work* is an open question. *Mobility for work* occurs where the place of work is immovable and yet inconstant. Place therefore remains important. *Mobility for work* occurs either 'anytime, particular place' (Figure 1, cell 2) or 'particular time, particular place' (cell 4).

- **Working while mobile:** *accountants; hand-knitters; editors; IT consultants; academics*. Some or all work tasks may be (but are not necessarily) carried out while mobile or at multiple sites. Formally *working while mobile* is a choice, but circumstances (time-pressure, location) may constrain this choice. *Working while mobile* is likely when journeys occupy a considerable portion of the day (perhaps due to *mobility for work* or long home-work commutes) or where pressure is exerted (from managers or family) to externalize workspaces (Felstead et al., 2005a). ICT transformations have expanded the tasks that are possible to do *working while mobile*. Notably, in stark contrast to *mobility for work*, place is of no importance (Figure 1, cells 1 or 3).

Given that jobs tend to involve a bundle of tasks workers may experience more than one type of mobility: the district manager who is *mobile for work*, moving from site to site, may also *work while mobile*, setting up meetings or completing paperwork while traveling between sites, similarly the paramedic is *mobile for work*, traveling to emergency sites, but is also *mobile as work*, responsible for the safe transportation of patients to hospital. However, as suggested above, *mobility as work* and *mobility for work* are considerably more likely to be experienced by blue and pink collar workers than *working while mobile*. On the contrary *working while mobile* is predominantly a white-collar experience.

It is only where the purpose of workers' real presence is communication rather than embodied interaction (whether with animate or inanimate materials) that tele- or virtual-presence may be an adequate substitute (and the requirement for *mobility for work* reduced). This is rarely the case for blue and pink collar work: blue-collar work often involves heavy (and not easily moveable) machinery, while pink collar work has typically involved customers or patients (nurse; nanny; hairdresser). In both instances the object of work mobility is co-presence with, or the movement of, materials (persons, machinery, or other physical objects). Therefore 'decorporealisation', is limited: experienced only by

those white-collar workers with increased opportunities for *working while mobile* and decreased need of *mobile for work*. The following sections empirically outline the occupational diversity of mobile work and then go on to explore in more depth one kind of *mobility for work*, mobile hairstyling.

## **Mobile work and occupation**

The quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS) is used to outline rates of mobile work and, later, to describe the mobile styling population and changes therein. Because many mobile workers are self-employed own-account workers they are only captured in individual, not establishment, surveys. The size of the LFS means that multiple occupational groups are well represented and inter- and intra-occupational variety can be explored. Importantly the LFS includes questions on place of work that allow identification of mobile workers. Respondents are asked whether they work mainly from home and one response is: *different places with home as a base*. There has been frustration about the fit between this response category and mobile work (Felstead et al., 2005a: 58-59), especially because it misses many occupations (like paramedic) which involve mobility from a work rather than home base. However, given the paucity of other indicators, the question provides a rough-and-ready, albeit imperfect, means for assessing mobility across the labour force. First included in 1981, the question was not used again until 1992 since when it has been included in every wave of the LFS.

Table 1 shows rates of mobile work by major occupational group (weights have been used to estimate population proportions). Skilled trade occupations (a group including occupations such as plumber and electrician) are the most mobile: over a quarter of skilled trades(wo)men work in different places with home as a base. This group comprises nearly a third of the total mobile workforce. In contrast white-collar work (the first four categories) comprise less than half (44 percent) of mobile work, despite accounting for over half of the labour force, while ‘managerial and professional’ workers, defined as broadly as possible (the top three categories) comprise 42.6 percent of mobile workers, with rates of mobile work within one percent of the UK average (8.6 percent).

Table 1 here

The occupational groups in Table 1 are large and heterogeneous, making it difficult to pinpoint exactly what mobile workers are doing. To disaggregate this information the following is a list of 24 highly mobile occupations (with rates of mobile work at least twice the national average)<sup>3</sup>:

|                                               |                                                |
|-----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| actors (61 percent mobile);                   | market and street traders (40 percent);        |
| beauticians (21 percent);                     | marketing and sales managers (20 percent);     |
| bricklayers (39 percent);                     | plasterers (58 percent);                       |
| chiropodists (55 percent);                    | plumbers and heating engineers (42 percent);   |
| clergy (40 percent);                          | photo and audio-visual operators (43 percent); |
| debt, rent, and cash collectors (36 percent); | roofers (61 percent);                          |
| driving instructors (81 percent);             | sales representatives (26 percent);            |
| fitness instructors (25 percent);             | seafarers (30 percent);                        |
| forestry workers (46 percent);                | trading standards inspectors (30 percent);     |
| gardeners and grounds-workers (43 percent);   | telecommunications engineers (28 percent);     |
| importers/exporters (23 percent);             | taxi drivers and chauffeurs (31 percent);      |
| management consultants (24 percent);          | window cleaners (60 percent).                  |

That only 31 percent of taxi drivers are listed as mobile is a reminder that the LFS measure only catches workers who ‘work in different places *using home as a base*’ [emphasis added] and so excludes workers who are mobile from a work-base (such as a minicab firm). But, notwithstanding imperfections in the measure, what stands out is the tremendous variety of peripatetic work.

## **Mobile styling**

This section focuses on a type of *mobility for work*, mobile hairstyling. Hairstyling is ‘body work’ (Wolkowitz, 2002), requiring touch and therefore co-presence. Clients must either go to workers or workers to clients. Historically clients have moved, traveling to salons or barbershops, but where clients are unable to move (through disability, illness or age), are unable to move within the temporal constraints of high-street open hours (long hours workers), or where moving is socially or economically difficult (parents caring full-time for young children encounter social, economic and logistical problems in attending salons or barbershops), worker mobility presents a solution. Clients are

spatio-temporally arranged: ready for stylists in particular places at specified times – thus the work is both time and place dependent. Stylists travel to these client-time-places from a home (or car) base. Mobile stylists are self-employed own-account workers, and although some work ‘casually’ many are tax registered (thereby accessing tax relief on car expenses, office and styling equipment). Mobile stylists have a reputation for being ‘cheap’, charging less than salons for equivalent services.

Each stylist-client interaction is formally one-off, but usually part of an ongoing series, potentially leading to a long-term relationship. Unlike some freelance workers (accountants; IT consultants) hairstylists’ clients are individuals and so when they go to clients’ premises they enter, and work within, other people’s private spaces, usually family homes. The difference between in-salon stylists and mobile stylists can be muddy since at least half of in-salon stylists do extra-salon styling after hours, some of this for pay (Author A, 2008). However, in this article the term ‘mobile stylist’ indicates stylists without an in-salon base (or other uniquely designated workplace), a definition stylists themselves employ.

Academic analysis of hairstyling has increased over the last decade (for instance, Drummond, 2004; Druker et al., 2005; Lee et al., 2007) as data has highlighted that the sector is badly paid and rapidly increasing (Nolan and Slater, 2003; Low Pay Commission, 2005). However peripatetic or ‘mobile’ hairstyling work, perhaps because of its invisibility, remains absent from the literature (the exception is a Hair and Beauty Industry Authority report (Berry-Lound et al., 2000)).

## **The changing shape of mobile styling**

Defining hairstylists as any LFS respondent with a main job in the industry ‘hairdressing and beauty parlours’ and occupational classification ‘hairdresser, barber’ or ‘hairdresser and barber manager and proprietor’ produced samples of 300 to 500 hairstylists in each of the 16 LFS waves examined.

Hairstyling is a ‘personal service occupation’, an occupational group with lower than average rates of mobile work (Table 1) and as can be seen from Figure 2, in 1981 the rate of mobile work in hairstyling was lower than the labour force average (1.6 as compared to 2.8 percent). However between 1981 and 2006 mobile hairstyling grew 800 percent, reaching 14.8 percent, whilst the average rate of mobile work grew slower (up 200 percent to 8.6 percent). Since the size of the occupation also increased the period saw a tenfold rise in the absolute number of mobile hairstylists (from 2,205 to 25,416).

Therefore hairstyling has become a disproportionately mobile occupation. By 2006 at least one in every hundred mobile workers was a hairstylist.

Figure 2 here

The movement from in-salon to mobile styling usually involves two different transitions – a change of employment relationship (from employee, to self-employed own account worker) and of spatial location (salon to mobile). It is therefore unsurprising that the first and most dramatic rise in mobile styling occurred during the 1980s, a period of rapid increases in UK self-employment (Yeandle, 1999: 154; Lindsay and Macaulay, 2004: 403). Indeed the proportion of in-salon stylists classified as self-employed without employees also increased (from 12 to 29 percent) between 1981 and 1992 (analysis not shown). This usefully reminds us that transitions to mobile work may be rooted in other organisational changes, here the opportunities conferred by self-employment to offload risk in a labour intensive temporally unpredictable industry. However in-salon ‘self-employment without employees’ fell back to around 20 percent between 1997 and 2006, partly due to increased government awareness of, and crackdown upon, ‘chair-renters’ as ‘disguised wage-earners’, whereas mobile styling rates have remained relatively steady. The sustainability of mobile styling may also be rooted in broader social changes, including the number and accessibility of ‘immobile’ clients (especially located in residential homes, which cluster relatively housebound clients for easy access by mobile stylists); and changes in clients’ normative expectations (including demands for 24 hour service availability). Although not driving mobile styling, technological innovation (albeit not ICT) may have played an enabling role – most importantly hand-held dryers, which proliferated from the 1960s (Cox, 1999: 197) made styling equipment more portable whilst increased car ownership among women facilitates stylist and equipment transport.

Although rates of mobile work have remained relatively static over the fifteen years since the first expansion in mobile styling, mobile stylists have altered. In 1992 (after the first increase) mobile stylists’ were quite like in-salon stylists’: somewhat more likely to be female, they were exactly the same average age (32), and no more likely to be married. By 2006 mobile stylists were an average nine years older than in-salon stylists (despite in-salon stylists also aging) and 60 percent more likely to be married and living with a spouse. This could be the result of the first large cohort of mobile-stylists aging (stylists aged 32 in 1994 were 42 in 2004). But the altered workforce profile may describe the

development of a new niche for older, married workers, given the coexistence of large numbers of trained, but not currently working hairstylists (Berry-Lound et al., 2000); increased expectations that women return to work after marriage and child-rearing; and large salons' exclusionary emphasis on the aesthetics of youth and trendiness (Lee et al., 2007; Lindsay, 2004). This raises the possibility that as service sector corporate aesthetics become more totalizing mobile work, especially *mobility for work* (where interactions occur in 'private' spaces), offers an escape for those workers who inevitably do not 'fit'. This is in stark contrast with suggestions, from studies of *working while mobile*, that mobile work extends the commodification of space and transformation of non-work spaces and aesthetics, again highlighting the importance of distinguishing types of mobile work.

## **Doing mobile styling and constructing boundaries**

The following examines mobile stylists' working lives in more depth, investigating the relationship between work mobility, place, and boundaries. Central issues are the interconnection between different 'dimensions' of the work-life boundary: social, temporal and spatial (Author A; 2008) and between these and stylists' employment relations. The section is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with seven mobile and formerly-mobile hairstylists in a city in the north of England (part of a wider investigation of hairstyling work, which also included interviews in over 50 salons). Arranging interviews was difficult: without identifiable workplaces mobile stylists are tricky to locate. Few are listed in business directories and most do not advertise widely. Moreover, as discussed below, their 'free times' are unpredictable making it difficult to arrange interviews. In consequence most mobile stylists in the study were identified via recommendations from in-salon stylists. Six interviews were face-to-face and one was by telephone. Evidence from two interviewees, Sandra and Fiona, is drawn upon in the following sections. They are selected as exemplifying (respectively) the lived experiences of bounded and unbounded mobile styling. Although neither is 'typical' of all mobile stylists, they represent relatively clear and contrasting positions on the work-life segmentation-amalgamation continuum (Nippert-Eng, 1996), therefore highlighting the conceptual issues involved. As 'extreme points' neither Sandra's nor Fiona's lives were identical to those of the other mobile stylists' interviewed; however characteristics of Fiona's unbounded mobile work were more common.

## **Unbounded mobile styling**

Fiona worked in a salon until she had her son. She then held other jobs, 'doing hairdressing in the background,' largely for friends and family. Gradually her clientele expanded through informal social interactions until eventually she turned full-time 'mobile'. Fiona gained advantages from overlapping social and styling relationships, especially in the accommodation of her extra-work life during the working day, for instance, taking her children with her to play with clients' children while she worked. However over time Fiona started to resent the ways that her 'work' role competed with and usurped extra-work social relations.

You get to a point, when you've done it for a long time. Your phone rings and it's never anybody to speak to you to see how you are. It's always, 'can you fit me in?' and you become: 'People aren't interested in me. They just want me for what I can do'.

Thus social unboundedness was both fundamental to Fiona's work-life (enabling her to build a clientele and combine childcare and work) but simultaneously impacted negatively on her extra-work-life. Fiona's social unboundedness also limited her capacity to construct spatial boundaries. This benefited her to the extent that workplaces could also be transformed into places of childcare or socialising. However, the constant requirement to build and maintain a 'following' meant that Fiona was willing to turn any space into a workspace, for example an encounter in a municipal sauna ended with her doing a haircut:

I sat in the shower room in sauna cutting this woman's hair. And after that she said, 'Give me your number,' and I used to go to her house and do her daughter's and hers and her husband's and it got me a whole family.

Fiona emphasizes the payoff here (the 'whole family'). But at other times the spatial and temporal seepage of work into extra-work times and spaces was characterized as problematic:

'I'd be out on a Saturday night in a pub and somebody would come up and say, 'Can you do my hair Tuesday?' You're always on call.

Here Fiona tries to mark a time (Saturday night) and place (pubs) as non-working, but elsewhere she mentions ‘finding’ regular clients through pub conversation. This contradictory strategy is the product of the simultaneous centrality of social and spatial integration to Fiona’s establishment and reproduction as a self-employed mobile worker and the corrosiveness of this on her non-working life. White-collar workers who *work while mobile* also experience spatio-temporal unboundedness but are less likely to experience the social integration of work and home, whereas for Fiona the unboundedness of *social relations* underpins her spatio-temporal unboundedness. Moreover with the blurring of the spaces and social relations of home and work, Fiona is unable to define her work as a job and therefore cannot persuade clients that she has non-working times.

It’s harder to get your holidays. Because if you’re in a shop, I close for Christmas and nobody dreams of asking. But when you’re done at home, they’re like, well, can’t you just nip round. And I don’t think people see it as a job either sometimes: you’re in and out of their homes

This underscores the importance of the particular social designation of places as ‘workplaces’ or not. Fiona’s work occurs in non-work or ‘private’ places and she is unable to transform these into workplaces. In this case space is not abstract but endowed with social meaning. Moreover the location of work in ‘private’ places creates unpredictability, and undermines her temporal control:

One of the worst things about it, was you’d turn up to do a cut and blow, and you’d allowed yourself your time. And you’d get there and they’d say auntie so-and-so has come, can you do hers while you’re here. Or can you just cut my husbands while you’re here. That was cramming your time.

Importantly this lack of control is not problematic *per se* but becomes so when refracted through particular employment relationships: as a self-employed worker, Fiona manages unpredictable demand for her services (‘you might not get any phone-calls’) and this pushes her to oblige clients’ and ‘cram’ her time.

Since *mobility for work* requires that workers are sequentially present at particular places at particular times gaps between ‘appointments’, or ‘dead times’, are likely. Where mobile work involves *working while mobile* the productive use of ‘dead times’ contributes to work intensification (Laurier, 2001;

Perry et al., 2001), but workers who, like stylists, are *mobile for work* are unproductive when between workplaces and times. 'Dead times' may be relished by employees who use them to 'steal time from the organisation' (Laurier, 2001: 13) but, with no-one to steal from, self-employed mobile workers are left with workdays cluttered by spatio-temporal in-betweens. Another temporal phenomenon exacerbated by the spatial isolation that mobile work imposes is 'baggy time'. The sequential spatial ordering of *mobility for work* enforces a linear approach to work-tasks. Since some tasks, like hairstyling, are not conducive to constant attention (dyes and perms take time to 'set') hiatuses are created, and workers are 'sat around waiting' in a strange place. These 'dead' and 'baggy' times are a systematic product of the spatial constraints of *mobility for work*, which, by dispersing workers and lessening the potential for a division of labour, undermines labour productivity.

### **Bounded mobile styling**

Sandra works a very regular 9am to 3pm, three days a week. Unlike Fiona, she constructed her clientele very deliberately, starting nearly 30 years ago with elderly clients who could not manage the steps of the salon at which she then worked. Over the years Sandra continues to recruit from her former salon (which has now changed owners). Additionally she has advertised in a local church magazine and uses home-care-workers as word-of mouth recruiters. From these sources she generates a steady stream of relatively housebound clients, she determines the number of clients she 'takes on' (only recruiting when an existing client dies or is close to death) and the area within which she operates (a tightly defined residential area, near her former salon). The production of an older clientele is a conscious strategy. When she first 'went mobile' Sandra had younger clients, especially women of her age with children, 'but then gradually as their children grew up and they had more freedom they'd go back out to the hairdressers.' In contrast she explains that with her older immobile clients, 'once you get them, then that's how it is until they die.' Because this clientele is consciously constructed the social boundary dividing styling and kin- or friendship relations is clear:

I think you can treat it like a nurse actually. You know how nurses can be so kind, but when they walk out of the door they forget about you. And that's the same kind of thing really. Because you can't become attached to people can you. When my ladies die, which of course they do, I always think, ahhh, I really liked her. And then fill the gap in with someone else.

Sandra's bounded relations with clients enable her to construct and maintain spatial boundaries. As mentioned above her clients occupy a contained and distinct residential area, meaning that Fiona has a relatively compact 'workscape' and since she lives in a different place the spaces of her work- and home-life do not overlap. Additionally despite working in 'private' places the relative anonymity and helplessness of her clients enables Sandra to maintain the definition of clients' homes as strictly workplaces: 'you don't go in and have a cup of tea and sit down for half an hour and chat.' Moreover the dependence, and therefore dependability, of her clients mean that Sandra's income is relatively secure and she has little pressure to recruit (or network) in extra-work social spaces. Thus consciously constructed social boundaries make mobility, and entry into individuals' 'private' spaces, commensurate with the retention of spatial boundaries.

Because Sandra's clients are relatively immobile and willing to be seen at her convenience the work becomes less time-dependent allowing Sandra to exercise the temporal control Fiona lacks. In consequence she all but eliminates 'baggy' and 'dead' times, establishing a remarkably constant workpace:

Each person has a time and I do one every half an hour. So I get to one at nine o'clock, put her under the dryer. Perhaps drive up the road a bit. Put the next lady under dryer at half past nine. Go back and comb the first one out. And do the next one at half past ten. It works quite well, because they're all quite well trained and they're all ready waiting for me.

As Sandra notes this schedule is only possible because her clients have been 'trained', which is in turn a product of her careful spatial and social screening. Importantly her clients are dependent (without styling alternatives); ready and waiting (with little else to do); and demand regular services (older clients' style preferences, a wash-and-set or (for men) short trim, require regular upkeep, while their desire for company means that stylist visits can be socially important). There are costs however, since Sandra, like other workers who are *mobile for work* can only eliminate 'baggy times' by inserting visits to new sites into gaps, and therefore increasing the number of journeys made, getting in and out of her car an uncomfortable '30 or so times a day'. Therefore *mobility for work* can be socially, spatially and temporally bounded, even where workers self-employed and working in 'private spaces', but this achievement is dependent upon the ability of workers, like Sandra, to resolve the chronic insecurity of their employment status.

## Conclusion

With growing numbers of workers engaged in forms of mobile work empirical and conceptual analysis of the phenomenon is timely. The LFS data highlights the immense variety of occupations that involve workers in spatial mobility however theoretical (and empirical) research on work mobilities has been fixated on novel developments in ICT and consequently on core technology users: white-collar workers. In consequence work mobility has been associated with the declining importance of place, decorporealisation, and alternately workers' freedom to work 'anytime, anywhere' or the unbounded demands of employers or clients. However these developments are not experienced by all mobile workers. The time-space (in)dependence of tasks and the type (or driver) of mobility as well as mobile workers' employment relations determine what mobility means, the importance (or not) of place, and workers' capacity to control their socio-temporal schedules.

This article has suggested that three 'types' of mobile work exist and whilst *working while mobile* is often a 'choice' *mobility for work* and *mobility as work* are usually necessitated by the work-tasks involved. *Working while mobile* is a peculiarly (although not solely) white-collar form of mobile work and the only type of mobile work positively related to ICT developments, whereas *mobility for work* and *mobility as work* are experienced by workers across the labour force.

Importantly this article has argued that where mobile work involves *mobility for work*, it occurs *because place matters*, because goods, people, crops, or structures are situated and because work requires workers be at particular workplaces to accomplish their work. As workers move to multiple places to do their work, place is also the root of unpredictability, something exacerbated when workplaces are simultaneously 'private' spaces controlled by another. Other authors have shown that *working while mobile* almost inevitably challenges work-life boundaries – since work *can* be done in multiple places and it is up to the worker to prevent work seeping into non-work spaces and times. In contrast, where workers are *mobile for work* they may (like Sandra, or the employed engineers studied by Hislop and Axtell (2007)) be able to retain bounded work and non-work social, temporal and spatial worlds. However this is only possible where workers' incomes are secure (whether because they are hourly paid employees or where self-employed when they have a reliable clientele). Without income security and especially where *mobility for work* occurs in private spaces, self-employed mobile workers

(like Fiona) experience social integration (the merging of social and work relationships) and spatial integration as a loss of temporal control.

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## Appendix: Tables and Figures

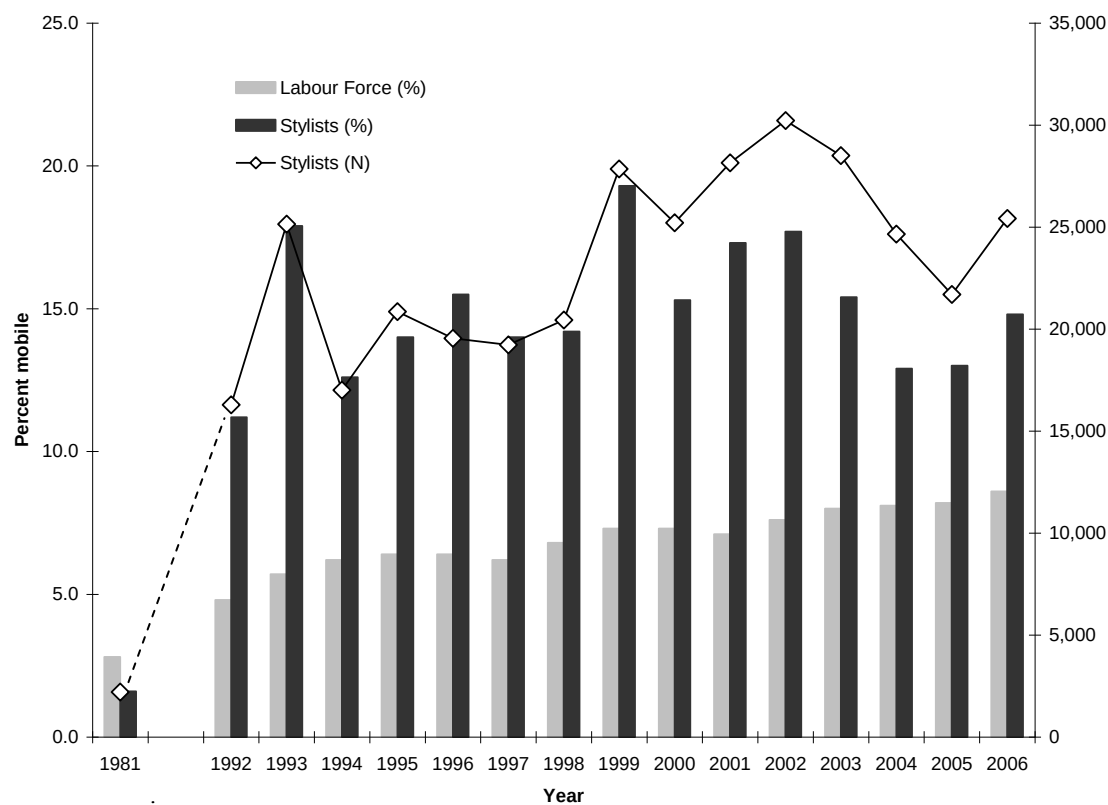
**Figure 1.** Time and place dependence, Adapted from Wiberg (2005)

|      |             | “Space” [Place]                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|------|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|      |             | Independent                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Dependent                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Time | Independent | <p><b>1. Anytime, anywhere: Tasks that can be done independent of time and place. They can be done anytime, anywhere.</b></p> <p>Work reliant on light-technology and no communication: <i>accounts or report writing, editing, design, crocheting...</i></p> <p>Communication work in which immediate response is unnecessary: <i>initiating email contact, leaving or checking phone messages...</i><sup>a b</sup></p> | <p><b>2. Anytime, particular place: Tasks that need to be done in a particular place but can be done anytime.</b></p> <p>Work requiring particular (immovable) technologies: <i>assembly line work, sound mixing...</i></p> <p>Work tied to a place but with no/open schedule: <i>construction and maintenance work, inspections...</i><sup>a</sup></p>                                                   |
|      | Dependent   | <p><b>3. Particular time, anywhere: Tasks that can be done independent of place but at a certain time or in a certain order.</b></p> <p>White-collar or service work requiring live-communication, but not co-presence: <i>IT support; telephone sales; negotiation; radio interview...</i><sup>b</sup></p>                                                                                                              | <p><b>4. Particular time, particular place: Tasks that must be done in a particular place within a particular time.</b></p> <p>Personal and professional services requiring co-presence: <i>‘body work’, direct-selling, teaching, live performance...</i></p> <p>Seasonal work on land/sea: <i>crop picking, fishing...</i></p> <p>Situated emergency work: <i>firefighting, emergency repair...</i></p> |

<sup>a</sup> This is a simplified presentation. In practice some of the examples of work in cells 1 and 2 might involve temporality (i.e. schedule or ordering or coordination) and therefore fall into cells 3 and 4 respectively.

<sup>b</sup> Although this work may not be constrained to a single place, it may be that in practice there are locations (e.g. that are loud or socially inappropriate) where some of this work cannot be done. Place independence may not therefore be absolute but relative.

**Figure 2.** Mobile work in the labour force and hairstyling, 1981-2006<sup>a</sup>



**Notes:** This data is based on the spring Labour Force Survey for each year in which a question about work location was asked. Percentages are calculated from those respondents who answered the question about location of work. Data is weighted by the appropriate variable to compensate for differential rates of response. Rates of mobile work in the labour force for 1981-2002 are from Felstead et al.(2005b: 420-421). For 2003-6 they are the author's own calculation. Rates and estimated numbers of mobile stylists fluctuate considerably because they are based on a relatively small sub-sample of the LFS.

**Table 1** Mobile Work by Major Occupational Group, Spring LFS 2006 <sup>a</sup>

| <b>Major occupational group</b>                   | <b>Percent of Total<br/>Mobile Workforce</b> | <b>Percent<br/>Mobile</b> | <b>N<br/>Mobile</b> |
|---------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|
| Managers and Senior Officials                     | 15.3                                         | 8.5                       | 364,385             |
| Professionals                                     | 11.7                                         | 7.8                       | 283,204             |
| Associate Professionals and Technical Occupations | 15.2                                         | 9.1                       | 368,738             |
| Administrative and Secretarial Occupations        | 2.3                                          | 1.7                       | 56,732              |
| Skilled Trades Occupations                        | 32.8                                         | 26.2                      | 796,237             |
| Personal Service Occupations                      | 4.8                                          | 5.3                       | 116,833             |
| Sales and Customer Service Occupations            | 3.0                                          | 3.4                       | 73,605              |
| Process, Plant and Machine Operatives             | 7.9                                          | 9.0                       | 190,778             |
| Elementary Occupations                            | 7.2                                          | 5.5                       | 175,341             |
| <b>Total</b>                                      | <b>100</b>                                   | <b>8.6</b>                | <b>2,425,853</b>    |

Notes: This table is based on the spring 2006 Quarterly Labour Force Survey. Percentages are calculated from those respondents who answered the question about location of work and occupation. Data is weighted to compensate for differential rates of response. Analysis is of workers' 'main job', thereby omitting those whose second job is mobile and under-representing occupations frequently pursued as second jobs.

## Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> The focus on ICT-dependent mobile work may have more prosaic causes. It would hardly be surprising if the personal experiences of academics and journalists, responsible for analyses of mobile work and users of mobile devices such as laptop computers, led to interest in ICT-dependent mobile professionals. But academic attention has been more systematically focused by ICT companies' sponsorship of social research. For example Sherry and Salvador's (2001) examination of mobile workers' coping strategies comes out of *Intel Labs' 'People and Practices Research group'*, while Perry et al.'s (2001) study is co-authored by a member of *Hewlett-Packard Laboratories*. This research is often high quality, and even critical, but the centrality of ICT to workers' mobility is an unexamined assumption.

<sup>2</sup> A couple of notable exceptions in the field of 'mobile work' are Baines and Gelder (2003) and Hislop and Axtell (2007); additionally studies of migrant labour examine disadvantaged workers' spatial movement, but focus on labour-market, rather than job-related (or work-task), mobility and longer-term movements: seasonal or even permanent

<sup>3</sup> Over 50 occupations fit this criteria; these were selected as evoking the range of highly 'mobile' occupations.